

THE ABILITY TO HANDLE CONFLICT IS A KEY FACTOR IN MANAGERIAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is inevitable in any organisation and can serve as a useful function by stimulating creative solutions to most of the management problems encountered. This paper however attempts to highlight the types of conflict that are normally prevalent in any educational institution. In addition, the causes as well as the role of the educational managers in handling conflict with particular emphasis both at the interpersonal and the organisational levels are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is pervasive in all human experience. Indeed it can occur within a single individual (so-called intrapersonal conflict) or between individuals, group, and between whole societies and cultures. In classical management theory, the existence of conflict is viewed as evidence of breakdown in the organisation; failure on the part of the management to plan adequately and effectively and to exercise control sufficiently. From the human relations point of view, conflict is seen in an especially negative light and as a proof of failure to develop appropriate norms in the group. The writers of human relations school believe that good human relations could prevent conflict from occurring.

Traditional administrative theory, therefore, has been strongly biased in favour of the ideal of a smooth-running organisation, characterised by harmony, unity, coordination, efficiency and order. Human relations adherents might seek to achieve this through a happy congenial work groups, while classical adherents would seek to achieve it through control and strong organisational structure.

Management today recognises the fact that the total lack of conflict within the organisation is not only impossible but undesirable. Moreover while a smooth integration of activities is needed, the organisation cannot remain static and comfortable with the status quo. Rather management must be proactive, anticipatory and or creating change and responding appropriately to changes in the environment. The absence of conflict may indicate abdication of responsibility, lack of interest or lazy thinking (Everard and Morris, 1985).

Within the educational institutions conflicts are omnipresent; they occur continually, arise from a variety of reasons, appear in a variety of ways and affect the educational process both favourably and unfavourably. The job of the educational managers daily appear to worsen and the majority of them are succumbing to the strain. This requires on the part of the educational managers to be aware, and to utilise, any aspects of the theory and practice which is available.

DEFINITION OF CONFLICT

The term conflict has been defined and interpreted in many ways. According to Thomas (1976) there is no consensus on a specific definition of 'conflict'. He sees conflict as a process which begins when one of the parties in an interaction perceives that another has frustrated, or is likely to frustrate one of his needs or concerns. Mesun et al (1985) define conflict as a disagreement between two or more parties, which may be individuals or groups. In this case, each party tries to gain acceptance of its view or objective and prevent the other party from doing the same. However, from the vast body of scientific literature there is a general agreement that two things are essential to any conflict;

- 1) divergent (or apparently divergent) views and
- 2) incompatibility of those views.

Merton Deutch (1973) states that 'a conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur'. This incompatibility gives rise to a dilemma; conflict becomes the pursuit of incompatible, or at least seemingly incompatible goals, such that gains to one side come out at the expense of the other.

Though conflict may originate as substantive, it can readily become affective. The former refers to the conflict that is rooted in the substance of the task while the latter denotes conflicts that emanate from the emotional, affective aspects of the interpersonal relationship (Likert, 1976). This affective involvement, in fact, is the central characteristics of conflict in organisations which the Likerts define as the active striving for one's own preferred outcome which, if achieved, precludes the attainment by others of their own preferred outcome.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Basically, we can classify the types of conflict that can occur in an educational institution into 4 main groups (Everard and Morris, 1985), namely;

- i) Conflict within an individual (Intrapersonal Conflict);
- ii) Conflict between or among individuals (Interpersonal conflict);
- iii) Conflict between individuals and a group; and
- iv) Conflict between groups (Intergroup Conflict).

i) Conflict Within an Individual (Intrapersonal Conflict)

Often, individual employees, consciously or not, experience conflicts at work. Individuals enter the organisation with certain sets of needs and expectations. The character of the individuals may be such that there arises an incompatibility between what they want and what the organisation wants them to be. Further, they may come to the organisation with certain expectations and violations of these expectations are a common occurrence in the life of many employees. Often, individuals may fail to conform to role-set expectations for a variety of reasons. First they may receive from role senders conflicting or contradictory expectations about how they are to perform - following the principal's expectations, for example, might mean violating important norms of a teaching team. Persons within the role-set might hold diverse expectations among which the individual will have to choose, as new lecturers have sometimes to choose between the faculty's various goals and those they were themselves taught at the university. This example of intrarole conflict illustrates conflicting demands that an individual acting in a single role cannot satisfy simultaneously.

ii) Conflict Between and Among Individuals (Interpersonal Conflict).

Conflict between and among individuals is probably the most widely recognised form of conflict. It manifests itself in an educational organisation in many ways. A common one is when two heads of department compete for limited capital, equipment, time, or for their pet projects to be accepted. Each perceives that, because the resources are limited, he must convince higher management to give them to him, not the other head of department. Similar, but often more subtle and long lasting, is the conflict that may occur between two people being considered for the same promotion.

Conflict between individuals may also manifest as personality clash. People with widely differing characteristics, attitudes, and values are likely to have views and aims that differ radically.

iii) **Conflict between the Individual and the Group**

Individual once formed into groups will establish norms of behaviour and output standards. In order to be accepted by the informal group and thereby satisfy social needs, an individual must adhere to these norms. However, if the group's expectations conflict with the individual's, a conflict may result. For example, a particular lecturer may work so hard in order to produce good results for their students in the final examination, but the group of lecturers may consider working 'too hard' as negative behaviour.

Similarly a conflict may arise from the principal's need for belongingness and to be accepted by his staff. Like most people, the principal usually wanted to be liked by the people with whom he works. However, part of the principal's job is ensuring the productivity remains at adequate levels and that the rules and institute's procedures are followed. These may be unpopular with the staff and cause them to retaliate by treating the principal more coolly and possibly decreasing productivity.

In certain cases we have conflict in the classroom that arises between a lecturer and a group of students over matters such as the teaching method, attitudes and the relevancy of the subject matter.

iv) **Conflict Between Groups (Intergroup Conflict)**

Educational institutions like any other organisations are composed of many groups both formal and informal. Conflict between them is not uncommon in even the best-managed institutions (Jones, 1987). Informal groups that feel management is treating them unfairly may become more cohesive and attempt to 'get even' by reducing productivity.

Conflict between groups, like that between persons, arises when attitudes are not shared across groups and when interests compete and are enhanced by mistrust and closed communications.

A number of salient types of intergroup conflict can be noted within the educational institution and some examples are:

a) **Conflicting Interests**

An example in this case is when one department in the institution wants to expand or improve its status, it may bring on complaints from other departments because it is calling on the use of limited funds.

b) **Conflict as a Consequence of Differential Group Treatment**

This may arise, for instance, when the principal is more biased towards the male lecturers at the expense of the female staff, in terms of work allocation, or providing better working conditions to the lecturers at the expense of the administrative staff. Active conflict between the lecturers union and management is another example of conflict between groups.

Having outlined the various types of conflict, it is desirable at this juncture to determine what are the causes that contribute to the existence of these conflicts in educational institutions.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

One of the primary demands of any educational organisation is that its various parts should be linked together to achieve overall objectives. To accomplish the common tasks and achieve the multifaceted goals generally requires collaboration, and for most educational tasks the need for participant interdependence is great.

It has been found that, however well the institute is being managed, conflict still bounds to occur and the reasons for this are numerous (Bowers, 1986). Among the major causes are because of the existence of limited resources, task interdependence, different goals, differences of values, personal styles and poor communication (Pondy, 1967).

ROLE OF MANAGEMENT IN HANDLING CONFLICT AT THE INTERPERSONAL AND THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL.

At Interpersonal Level

Managing interpersonal conflict is often said to be management of differences among people. Selecting an approach to manage conflict relies heavily on the management ability to diagnose a conflict before it occurs. Interpersonal conflict usually evolves through stages. There is a stage of anticipation, for example, when any new change is to be introduced in the institute, differences of opinion are expected to arise. Secondly, there is phase of conscious but unexpressed differences among people. At this stage tensions build up and a feeling of impending dispute and trouble occurs. The third phase usually follows, in which the information regarding proposed change is presented, and differences of opinions between individuals begin to emerge openly. Finally, there is a phase of open dispute and open conflict in which opinions or differences that have been expressed only indirectly and tentatively now sharpen into more clearly defined points of view and begin to be seen in terms of win, lose or compromise. The important point is that the proper strategy for managing conflict and the power of the management to make effective decisions depend on their intervening successfully. But the success of the intervention will differ in each of these phases.

There would appear to be five distinct styles which can be employed in coping with situations in which interpersonal conflict occurs or is likely to occur (Thomas, 1976). They are:

- i) Forcing style;
- ii) Collaboration;
- iii) Compromise;
- iv) Avoidance; and
- v) Problem-solving

AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

Sometimes conflicts arise in an institute when the teaching and the administrative staff unions have a negative attitude towards the way in which the institute are being run. This could arise for example, because of the poor working conditions; dissatisfaction over the leadership style who always bulldose things in order to get it done, always being aloof and practising a 'rigid' management style.

When tension arises, the head would become very frustrating, for under such situations, there is a great possibility that the staff are working not for him but against him. He will be alone in trying to make the organisation work. And there is no coherent opinion about how things should be done. This crisis if not properly resolved by the head would lead to disastrous effects to the institute. In order to resolve this problem. Everard and Morris (1985) suggest that the head should use the 'Gap theory' by asking the staff to state their ideal views and compare it with his actual perceptions. The gap between the two is what then has to be bridged.

This technique will take much of the heat out of the discussion thus enabling the problems to be treated at a rational level. This exercise, is ideal if only the leaders from the various groups are involved.

When there are blockages in the negotiation, the management and the parties involved should bring in a mediator to try to resolve the conflict. However, the conflict may not have effect if no compromise is possible - if one side must win and the other lose.

CONCLUSION

Conflict is not only inevitable but, contrary to earlier views, it can serve a useful function by stimulating creative solutions to problems. Whether or not organisational conflict is destructive or constructive depends to a large extent on how it is managed. The day is over for the wily educational administrator who could head off or terminate conflict with deft tricks or a swift exercise of power. Healthy organisations - characterised by well-developed problem-solving mechanisms and a collaborative climate are able to identify conflict and deal with it in a collaborative way that leaves the organisation stronger and more well-developed rather than weakened and wracked with hostility.

It has been found that there is no one best way of managing conflict in organisations. There are a number of ways, each suited to circumstances in a particular situation. The basic principle in choosing a way of managing conflict, however, is to use the approach most likely to minimise the destructive aspects and to maximise the opportunities for organisational growth and development.

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Firman Allah S.W.T.

"Maka bertanyalah kamu kepada ahli ilmu jika kamu tidak tahu".

(Surah An-Nahi, Ayat 43)