Conflict Resolution Strategies Adopted By School Managers In Secondary Schools In Nigeria

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Abstract:
This study investigated the strategies adopted by managers of secondary schools in Edo state of Nigeria. One hundred and twenty (120) managers of secondary schools, 25% of 480 were drawn from the three senatorial districts across the state took part in the study. The conflict resolution strategy instrument (CRSI) was used in gathering data which was analyzed with the aid of simple percentage and t-test statistics. The study found that managers of secondary schools used the conflict avoidance, smoothing, compromise and competitive strategies, ether frequently or once in a while in resolving conflicts in their schools. On the other hand, the forcing strategy was never used by the managers. The study concluded that from all indications conflict exist in every organization, including the educational sector and that as long as human beings interact, conflict must occur. However, once it occurs, conflict must be resolved. That is managers of secondary schools should use the appropriate strategy to resolve conflicts in their schools. The study therefore recommends that managers of secondary schools in Nigeria should be trained in the art of conflict and conflict resolution strategies, especially in the mediation and arbitration strategies.

1. Introduction

Conflict in this paper is conceived as a struggle over values and resources, claims to status, power and recognition which involve two or more persons or parties who may have taken opposing sides. It could be observed that conflicting situations arise from differences in ethnicity, perception, interest, beliefs, desires, goals, ideology, philosophies, among others. Conflict occurs especially when the parties mentioned above are competing for limited resources. This was buttressed by Moorhead and Griffin (2008) who opined that conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occurs such that gains to one side come out at the expense of the other.

As a matter of fact, the human resources of an organization consist of people with diverse cultural, economic, social, political and religious background. This therefore reflects in their attitude to work, world view and frame of reference which ultimately make their control often difficult for the manager. These differences could also culminate in clash of interest among the workforce which if not properly managed, could degenerate into a serious situation.

Although conflict is often considered harmful and thus something to avoid, it can also have some benefits. Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly (1997) stated that a total absence of conflict can lead to apathy and lethargy. A moderate degree of focused conflict on the other hand, can stimulate new ideas, promote healthy competition, and energize behaviour. In some organizations especially profit oriented ones; many managers believe that conflict is dysfunctional. While on the other hand, many mangers in none profit organizations like the educational institutions view conflict as beneficial and conducive to higher quality decision making when properly managed.

There is no doubt that conflict is a part of life, often a part of growth and change. We can live with it, which implies learning about it, making choices and seeking to transform it in a creative way; or we can live in it and allow it to undermined objectives or become destructive (Ogundele 2005). In the same vein Weihrich, Cannice and Koontz (2008) also agree that conflicts are part and parcel of man's existence. According to them, disagreements among people are natural. People must disagree to agree and conversely, it becomes logical that they should agree to disagree. But such agreement or disagreement to agree does not in itself constitute conflict. It has been argued elsewhere that societies which are stable are not those that are conflict free, but those that have in place, structure for the successful management of conflict situations. An organization lives on the principles of interaction and is therefore susceptible to conflict which is also thought to be invaluable. A major argument in some studies is that history has such a bad name to conflict as to push out its bad side and neglect its acknowledgement of some of its positive gains (Mogaji, 2002; and Wittenman, 2008). While there is no position among scholars that organizations should deliberately stair up predisposition, the point is that conflict can be converted to opportunities to evaluate and reassess practices and plans, as well as strengthen the necessary interactions for the ultimate good of its organization and its staff (Chuck, 2005).

Onyeonoru and Bankole (2001) say that conflict embodies a total range of behaviour and attitudes expresses opposition and divergent orientations between parties in a system or organization. It arises from perceived incompability of actions, goals, cognitions or emotions within or between individuals or groups and leads to oppositions or antagonistic interactions. Conflict also involves divergence of or disagreement between the subunits of a system that may cause incongruity or disharmony in the whole (Aigboje 2009).

But what is conflict? Moorhead and Griffin (2008) define conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) see it as purposeful struggle between collective actors who use social power to defeat or remove opponents and to gain status, power, resources and other scarce values. Similarly, Song, Dyer and Thieme, (2006) see conflict as perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously. Folger, Poole and Stutman (1997), provides a comprehensive definition of conflict as follows:

Conflict is a major disagreement that generates antagonism and opposition in the relationships between persons, groups and organizations. If it does occur when some persons because of differences interfere with, in terms of obstruction, counteraction and opposition, the attainment of the goals and interests of others.

Basic to all these definitions, according to Ogundele (2005), is the factor of relationship. To him conflict is a product of interaction between or among parties. It is only possible among those who interact, have interacted or will interact. Organizations experience conflict at various levels because there are stated relationships and common objectives, there are stated means and there is a selected group of people, management and staff that have to interact within defined structure.

Weihrich, Cannice and Koontz (2008) identified characteristics of conflicts as follows:

- it is a complex multidimensional construct encompassing different aspects of individual and group behavior;
- there must be at least two issues or views or motives or individuals or groups or parties for the concept of conflict to have meaning;
- parties to a conflict usually have high effective involvement on issues;
- the views and interests of parties in a conflict situation are often polarized;
- both parties to a conflict usually have articulate leaders who are primarily responsible for fostering the development and maintenance of conflicts;
- attempts are occasionally made to resolve conflicts when followers of leaders to the parties press for a resolution as a result of the negative impact of the conflict on them;
- the resolution of conflict sometimes requires a third party;
- a third party will be effective in the conflict resolution exercise if the third party is respected and perceived to be neutral by the feuding parties;
- a conflict can be resolved partially or totally;
- the resolution of a conflict maybe temporary or enduring;

The causes of conflict could be varied. Experts, however, agreed that it could be caused by both internal and external factors. The internal factors include: management style, nature of physical environment of the workplace, consciousness of workers, conditions of service, communication breakdown, overload, organizational politics, and limited resources. The external factors on the other hand include: government industrial and economic policies, the nature of labour legislation, on patriotic behaviour of the political class, national economic mismanagement, general distribution of wealth and property in the society, as well as other political considerations, decision making, lack of clarity and lack of ambiguity (Otobo, 1983; Owena, 1995; Epie, 2001; Moorhead; Griffin, 2008 and Omoike, 2013).

Conflict also occurs in the school setting. It could happen among teachers, between teachers and managements, students and teachers or even between the school and the community. The educational system, for instance, has witnessed a lot of conflicts because of the divergent role perceptions of government and the various unions in the educational system. According to Egbokhare (2001) one of the primary causes of conflict in Nigerian Universities between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and government is conflict of perception of the mission of universities. ASUU, sees its role as that of defending and protecting the interest of the country as a whole. It sees in the universities the role of a people's tribute, a critical watchdog for the society striving to contain the excesses of the ruling class, and the government sees the universities as organs of the state's bureaucracy, parastatals of a king which should be loyal to the national interest as defined and interpreted by the state. The government believes that ASUU as employees of government parastatals should not go beyond teaching and research that they must operate within the policies of government and resources made available by the management of the university system. This position according to Imhabekhai(2001), is often resisted by ASUU and the resistance breeds conflict.

As conflict occurs, it is bound to be resolved. This is because unless conflicts are resolved it may be difficult to achieve the objectives of the organization. At the school level, teaching, learning, research and services would be seriously jeopardized, if conflicts are not resolved. Conflict management is the process of using interpersonal relationship and communication to get parties in a conflict to reduce the differences in their ideas and views so as to arrive at amicable and satisfactory consensual ideas and views through arbitration, bargaining and negotiation. In the view of Powell and Hickson (2000), the extent to which a conflict is resolved, depends upon the extent to which the parties to the conflict perceive their negotiated gains and losses during bargaining to be relatively equitable.

In a study among Nigerian managers, Mack (2007) asked them to remember conflict episode in which they had been involved in the past and to evaluate in retrospect, the way they had handled the conflict. Results revealed that majority of respondents showed evidence of positive learning as a result of the process of review, that more respondents seem to have learned from their mistakes than from their successes, that female managers were more likely to recall unsatisfactory conflict episodes and that male had satisfactory ones. But those both male and female managers were equally likely to learn from the process review. Respondents who learned from the review of conflict episodes were those who examined themselves critically and made a conscious effort to

understand the opposite side's points of view this in effect indicates that Nigerian managers are ready to learn from past mistakes and resolve conflicts in the best interest of the organization.

In resolving conflicts, five major strategies are usually available to managers these strategies according Hayes (1991) and kazmi (2003) are: conflict avoidance, smoothing, compromise, competitive and forcing resolution strategies. Kiosky, (2002) and Ken, (2010) reported that handling conflict was a conglomeration of behavioural components characterized by a pattern of occurrence and by a pattern of co-variation of its components. Theories, according to them, had predicted that the forcing components are countered effective and that the problem solving components enhanced effectiveness. Result from their studies indicated an increase in problem solving tended to enhance effectiveness especially if a superior combined it with much forcing vis-à-vis as a subordinate. However, an increase in controlling the process had an extremely positive effect on the parties' joint outcome and mutual relationship.

In Bangladesh, Onyene and Nwadinigwe (2007) reported Stein (1997) as founding support for the convergent discriminate validities of the sub-scale measuring the five styles of handling conflict (integrating, obtaining, dominating, avoiding and compromising) and general support for the invariance of the five factor model across referent roles (i.e supervisors, subordinates and peers), organizational levels (top, middle and lower) and non-management and four of the five samples. In the same vein Onyene and Nwadinigwe (2007) on their own examine the correlate of organizational conflict and its efficiency among Nigerian universities system. The result did not indicate any significant difference in the perception of organizational conflicts among the universities managers, workers and heads of department. In the same way Mogaji (2002) examined the correlate of industrial conflict among Nigerian workers. The result also did not indicate any significant difference in the perception of industrial conflict among the managers, junior workers and supervisors.

Most of the empirical works that exists on conflict resolution are in the areas of industrial enterprises and tertiary institutions. But how our managers of secondary schools are resolving conflicts in their schools from time to time is the subject matter of this study.

2.Statement Of The Problem

In any secondary school environments various groups of people are always found. Such people are principals, teaching staff, non-teaching, students and parents. In the process of their interaction to achieve educational goals, conflicts may always erupt. Since conflicts are natural part of life, learning to deal constructively with it is a life skill which managers of schools, teachers and students need. For this reason, managing conflict in secondary schools has been a subject of discussion among educators. The reason is that conflict is bound to arise in any organization like secondary school system. The system could become critical as a result of increase of population in secondary school system. When staff and students learn to resolve their conflicts the organizational climate in the school may become more pleasant. Since organizations such as schools have conflicts, what seem to be lacking is effective conflict management skills. Therefore, the problem of school managers is the need to know how to effectively manage and resolve conflict if they are to become responsible managers. How managers handle conflict is an important determinant of how smoothly an organization will operate.

The consequence of conflict of schools and government in Nigeria are regrettable. There is a decline in academic standard in Nigeria educational system (Obeameata 2005). This decline according to him among other reasons may be due to failure of educational managers to properly carry out their managerial tasks. Part of its repercussions on schools is destruction of academic programs, hostility, withdrawers of active participation in school activities and sanction of various degrees depending on the nature of the case. All this may contribute in one way or the other to a steady decline in the quality of education in Nigeria.

The problem is not whether conflict should be stop but how it can be managed. Based on these problems therefore, this study investigated the strategies adopted by managers of secondary schools in Edo State of Nigeria in resolving conflict in their schools. Specifically, the study examined the extent to which secondary school managers use each of these strategies of avoidance, smoothing, compromise, competitive and forcing strategies in resolving conflicts. It also examined the extent to which gender, managerial experience and school location affects manager's usage of conflict resolution strategies.

3.Research Questions

The following research questions and hypotheses were proposed to guide the study.
- What are the strategies adopted by managers of secondary schools in resolving conflicts in their schools?
- Does school location influence managers of Secondary school choice of conflict resolution strategies?

4.Hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no significant difference in the usage of conflict resolution strategies between male and female managers.

Ho_2: There is no significant difference in the usage of conflict resolution strategies between experienced and less experienced managers.

Ho_3: School managers in urban areas do not significantly differ from school managers in rural areas in their choice of conflict resolution strategies.

5.Methodology

The design for this study is ex-post facto descriptive survey research design. This is because the variable "conflict and resolution strategies" had finished interacting. Only a description of what already exist took place.

The study population comprises of all secondary schools in Edo State. The sample used for the study was 480 where 25% of 120 participants were randomly selected from public senior secondary school managers drawn from the three senatorial districts of Edo State, Nigeria namely Edo South, Edo Central and Edo North were used for the study.

Data for the study was collected through the conflict resolution strategies instrument (CRSI) that was designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was of two sections. Section A is about the demographic of the managers such as gender, administrative experience and location of schools. While section B consists of the strategies made up of 15 items as follows:

- Avoidance strategy 3 items. (1-3)
- Smoothing strategy 3 items. (4-6)
- Compromise strategy 3 items. (7-9)
- Competitive strategy 3 items. (10-12) and
- Forcing strategy 3 items. (13-15)

The content and face validity of the instrument used was carried out by experts drawn from the Departments of Educational Foundations and Management, Guidance and Counseling and Curriculum and Instructions of the Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma. The experts made necessary corrections and constructive criticisms which were useful for the preparation of the final draft of the questionnaire. The reliability of the instruments was done through the test-retest procedure in Ondo State, that is, a neighboring state. Thirty managers of secondary schools were used for this pilot study. About three weeks interval was used for the conduct of the two tests. The data obtained were analyzed with Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. The constitency of the instrument yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.79 and 0.81. The instrument was administered on the respondents with the help of three trained research assistants who helped in administering and retrieving the questionnaire after completion by the respondents. The reason for this was to ensure a high return rate. All the 120 questionnaires distributed were retrieved. The data collected were analyzed using the simple percentage to answer the research question while t-test statistics was used in testing the three hypotheses and this was done at 0.05 alpha level of significant.

6.Findings
The findings of the analysis were presented as follows;

6.1.Research Question 1
What are the strategies adopted by managers of secondary schools in resolving conflicts in their schools.
The responses to the questions are presented in table 1.

S/N	Conflict Resolution strategies	Rate of usage		
		Frequently	Once in a while	Never
1.	Avoiding conflicts by treating staff and students equally	103 (86%)	17 (14%)	------
2.	Nipping crises in the bud before the conflict escalates	36 (30%)	84(70%)	------
3.	Restraining staff and students from unnecessary argument	33(28%)	87(72%)	------
4	De-emphasizing area of disagreement among staff and students	100(83%)	20(17%)	------
5.	Settling grievances by coming up with views which appear similar to all the parties	36 (30%)	84 (70%)	------
6	Playing down controversial issues among staff and students	80 (67%)	40 (33%)	-----
7.	Encouraging all sides to make concessions	71 (59%)	49 (41%)	-------
8.	Making concessions by the manager while settling disputes	13 (11%)	103 (89%)	-----
9.	Ensuring that all parties accept blames and praises appropriately	113 (94%)	7 (6%)	-------
10	Collectively solving all controversial issues involved	78(65%)	42(35%)	
11	Allowing for cross examination by the group involved	30 (25%)	90 (75%)	
12	Allowing each group to recommend satisfactory solution to the problem	31 (26%)	89 (74)	
13	Imposing my own decision on the parties	-----------	11 (9%)	109 (91%)
14	Allowing each group to engage in limited war	-------------	25 (21%)	95 (79%)
15	Allowing each group to engage in total war	--------------	8 (7%)	112 (93%)

Table 1: Strategies Adopted By Managers Of Secondary Schools In Resolving Conflicts In Their Schools

Table 1 above present a picture of how managers of secondary schools resolve conflict in their schools from the analysis. It has shown that the conflict avoidance, smoothing, compromise and competitive strategies were used either frequently or once in a while in resolving conflict in their schools. On the other hand the managers' response showed that they never use the forcing strategy or used it once in a while in resolving conflicts.

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in the usage of conflict resolution strategies between male and female managers.
This hypothesis was tested using the t-test statistics for two independent sample means for male and female managers on the usage of conflict resolution strategies in the result obtained is presented in Table 2.

Subjects	N	X	SD	DF	t-cal	t-critical	Remark
Male managers	98	6.12	2.33				Not significant
Female managers	22	5.64	2.04	118	1.84	1.96	p>0.05

Table 2: Male And Female Managers' Usage Of Conflict Resolution Strategies

The results in Table 2 indicates that the probability level of 0.05, the calculated of 1.84 is less than the t-critical of 1.96. This therefore means that there is no significant difference between the conflict resolution strategies for both male and female managers of secondary schools.

Ho$_2$: There is no significant difference in the usage of conflict resolution strategies between experienced and less experienced managers.
This hypothesis was tested using the t-test statistics for two independent sample means for experienced and less experienced managers on the usage of conflict resolution strategies. The result obtained is represented in Table 3.

Subjects	N	X	SD	DF	T-cal	t-critical	Remark
Experienced managers	102	5.89	4.76				Not significant
Less experienced managers	18	5.03	3.99	118	1.64	1.96	p>0.05

Table 3: Experienced And Less Experienced Managers' Usage Of Conflict Resolution Strategies

From the analysis presented in Table 3, it shows that experience has nothing to do with the way and manner managers of secondary schools use conflicts resolution strategies in their schools. The t-calculated of 1.64 is less than t-critical which 1.96. This therefore means that there is no significant difference between the conflict resolution strategies used by experienced and less experienced managers.

Ho3: School managers in urban areas do not significantly differ from school managers in rural areas in their choice of conflict resolution strategies.

This hypothesis was tested using the t-test statistics for two independent sample means for rural and urban school managers on usage of conflict resolution strategies. The result obtained is represented in Table 4.

Subjects	N	X	SD	DF	T-cal	t-critical	Remark
Rural	54	5.73	5.16				Significant
Urban	66	4.37	3.87	118	1.97	1.96	P<0.05

Table 4: Rural And Urban School Managers' Usage Of Conflict Resolution Strategies

Table 4 shows the t-test of difference between rural and urban school managers use of conflict resolution strategies in schools. The finding of the study on the table revealed that a significant difference exists in rural and urban school managers' use of the conflict resolution strategies. The general observation of the table shows that school managers in rural areas used more conflict resolution strategies in resolving conflicts more than their counterparts in the urban areas.

7.Discussion Of Findings
The finding from this study shows that managers of secondary schools adopt various strategies in resolving conflicts that rises in their schools. From the result it is very clear that managers use the avoidance, smoothing, compromise and competitive strategies either frequently or once in a while in resolving conflicts. For instance 86% of the respondents endeavor to treat all staff and students equally thereby avoiding any conflict at all. 72% of them once in a while restrain members of staff and students from arguments that could lead to conflicts. While 70% of the managers would rather nip crises in the bud before they escalate. This finding agreed with the observation of Wittenman, (2008) that conflict arises as a result of long process of agitation, disharmony, sensitivity to demands and neglects of warning signals that are either manifest or latent. According to him an organization that has put machinery in place to monitor dissatisfaction and displeasure at all levels is likely to quickly locate possible predisposing factors to conflict and nib them in the bud.
Managers of secondary schools also adopt the smoothing strategy in resolving conflicts in their schools. 83% of them frequently de-emphasize areas of disagreement among members of staff and between staff and students. Also in doing this, 70% of the mangers settle grievances by coming up with views that appear similar to all the parties. Managers of secondary schools also adopt the system of playing down on controversial issues among staff and students. The smoothing strategy, according to Powell and Hickson (2000) is rather a lose-lose method in that the major controversial issues are played down; and lasting solution may not be totally assured. This strategy is not however totally bad. What the managers tries to do here is to avoid further escalating of the conflict by closing gaps, especially in the areas of the differences in order to cool down nerves.

The use of compromise method is also popular among the managers in resolving conflict in their schools. In doing this various parties are not only encouraged to make concessions, the managers also make concessions on their own part. While at the same time ensuring that all parties are ready to accept blames and praises appropriately. The compromise method is useful in resolving Conflicts, in that it involves constructive dialogue by the parties with a view of finding a solution to the problems. Wittenman, (2008) also calls the approach collaboration in which the interests of both parties are tabled and efforts are made to satisfy all interests equitably. The goal is to ensure that everyone is satisfied, take home again, loses same and the relationship is strengthened.

The competitive strategy is also being used by the managers. 65% of them indicate that they collectively solve all conflicts with the parties frequently. Once in a while 75% of the managers allows for cross-examination by the group concerned as well as allow each group to recommend satisfactory solution to the problem. The competitive strategy involves open exchange of views in the final analysis, a solution satisfactory to both teams is found.

The forcing conflict resolution strategy is not popular at all among the managers of secondary schools. 91% of them indicate that they never impose their decisions on the parties. 95% also indicate that they never allow each group to engage in limited war. The same way 93% equally indicate that they never allow each group to engage in total war. This finding agrees with the findings of Onyeonoru and Bankole (2001) that the forcing strategy countered effectiveness and that the problem-solving component enhanced effectiveness. As a matter of fact conflicts are better resolved not by forcing a party to succumb to threats, intimidations, but by allowing for constructive dialogue, objectivity and free flow of communication.

Further more this study shows that there are no significant differences in the usage of conflict resolution strategies by both male and female managers as well as between experienced and non-experienced managers. Zabalak & Morley, (2004) and Galye (2007) had earlier found no significant difference in the perception of industrial conflict among managers and supervisors. They also found no significant difference in the perception of male and female employees, concerning sources of conflict. These studies therefore show that the resolution strategies adopted by managers of secondary schools are the same irrespective of sex and experience. In the views of Zabalak & Morley, (2004) and Galye, (2007), this type of findings portends a very good omen to the management to be able to adopt a unique method of conflict resolution and create conducive atmosphere for the industrial relations practice.

While Table 4 reveals that a significant difference exists in rural and urban areas, school managers use of conflict resolution strategies. The general observation of the findings was that school managers in rural areas use more of conflict resolution strategies in resolving conflict more than their counterparts in the urban areas. The possible interpretation of the finding of this study could be attributed to urbanization growth in Nigeria. Students and teachers in rural areas with poor or little amenities tend to move to urban areas where they will enjoy urban facilities and development. By this means, population of rural schools decreases from time to time.

Supporting the above assertion, Obemeata(2005),carried out research on school location and conflict management and observed that the location of schools in urban or rural setting affects the mode of conflict resolution strategies of administrators. He observed among other things that there was inequality of educational opportunities and the distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas. He further discovered that in the staffing of schools rural schools always suffer shortages, which seriously affect teaching and learning and many times degenerate to conflict among students, teachers and school managers. In other to arrest these problems and reduce conflict in rural areas, government should try to provide both human and material resources in rural schools.

8.Conclusion and Recommendation

From all indications, conflict abounds in every organization including the educational institutions. As long as human beings interact, conflict is bound to occur. But then, once it occurs, conflict must be resolved. However, it behooves on managers of secondary schools to be aware and learn how to use appropriate strategies in resolving conflict.

Apart from the strategies discussed above, conflict could also be resolved through mediation and arbitration. Mediation according to Aigboje (2009) is a voluntary confidential process that allows two or more disputing parties to resolve their conflict in a mutually agreeable way with the help of neutral third party as a mediator. The third party is usually invited by parties in a conflict to facilitate reconciliation and peace. Mediators according to him can be chosen from within or outside the organization depending largely on the perception of the neutrality of the mediator by parties in the conflict. Such a mediator must also win confidence and respect of the disputants.

Arbitration is also another method that could be used in resolving conflicts. Here the parties agree to submit their arguments and positions to a neutral party who is empowered to act like a judge, pronounce judgment and the parties are bound to abide by the decision. The disadvantage here is that a party may win, while the other loses. The natural fallout is that the continuity of existing relationship may not be quarantined. Whatever it is, arbitration should be seen as a last resort.

It is recommended by the researcher that managers should adopt the most suitable strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their managerial roles. Then explore all other strategies before resulting to the court. It is also recommended that managers of secondary schools should be trained in the art of conflict resolution strategies since conflicts are normal occurrences in organizations. The school authorities should make conflict management course in tertiary institutions a compulsory requirement for all school managers

9.References

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