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A Review of Conflict Management in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Nigerian tertiary institutions have over the years witnessed incessant conflicts between trade unions, particularly Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Government. The existence of conflicts in Nigerian institutions is a mere reflection of the heterogeneous structure of the outer society, where the struggle for a fair share of the common good by individuals and groups is the order of the day. Conflict, which is here defined as a manifestation of disagreement between individuals and groups, arising from differing and mutually incompatible interests, has both positive and negative effects, depending on how it is managed. Managing conflict is all about limiting the negative aspects of conflict, while promoting the positive aspects. This paper attempts to review conflict management in Nigerian tertiary institutions with a focus on Nigerian Universities and how best the positive elements of conflict can be maximally exploited to the mutual benefits of both parties. The major factors that precipitate conflicts between ASUU and the Federal Government include: funding of university system, the issue of university autonomy, staff conditions of service, as well as politics and national issues. There are available strategies that can be used in conflict management. These include avoiding, accommodating or smoothing, competing or forcing, compromising and collaborating. Any of these strategies can be effectively used to manage conflict, depending on the situation, the environmental factors, the nature of the conflict and the parties to the conflict. The problem is that the Nigerian Government often adopted wrong approach in dealing with conflicts with ASUU, using either avoiding or forcing strategies. This paper recommends collaboration strategy, which ensures long-term solution with mutual benefits to both parties.

Keywords: Review, conflict management, Nigerian tertiary institutions

1. Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa with a projected population of 182 million people (Bello, 2016), is a complex, heterogeneous nation. Ghaji Bello, the Director-General of National Population Commission, stated that half of the estimated population is less than thirty years of age. With a teeming population in diverse ethnic, socio-cultural and religious affiliations, multifarious economic and social problems are bound to arise, leading to numerous societal conflicts. The existence of conflicts in Nigerian tertiary institutions is thus a mere reflection of the outer societal phenomena, where the struggle for a fair share of the common good by individuals and groups is the order of the day.

Conflict has been variously defined by practitioners, academicians and researchers. Desivilya (1998) views conflict as a state of disharmony that could be brought about by differences of impulses, desires or tendencies, while Ibukun (1997) sees it as a form of disagreement between two or more parties. Adeyemi and Ademilua (2012) define conflict as all forms of opposition, disagreement and friction between two or more parties, which manifest in the form of arguments, protests, demonstration, aggression and other forms of destructive behaviour. At organizational level, Hicks and Gullett (1981) assert that conflict occurs when organizational units are interdependent, share resources and perceive their goals as incompatible. Mitchell (1991) agrees that conflict is a situation in which two or more parties have incompatible objectives and in which their perceptions and behaviour are commensurate with that incompatibility. Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami (2015) articulate the dimensions of Mitchell (1991) definition of conflict to include conflict situation, which is the basic incompatibility, conflict attitudes (range of psychological factors) and conflict behaviour manifested as a set of related behaviour.

These dimensions are similar to Hicks and Gullett (1981) three levels of conflict, identified as perception, feeling of conflict and behaviour. At the first level of perception, there is a realization that conflict exists because goals of the parties are incompatible and opportunity for interference is present. At the second level, the conflict is felt, generating a feeling of anger or mistrust between the groups, which may, in reaction to the first two levels, lead to behaviour at the third level. Adejuwon and Okewale (2009) view conflict as a result of human interaction and an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions, in the context of incompatible ends. Shur (2007) conceptualizes conflict as expression of incompatibility of subject positions, a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. From the various viewpoints, it can be summarily stated that conflict is a manifestation of disagreement between individuals and groups arising from differing and mutually incompatible interests.

Conflicts in tertiary institutions are of different kinds and at various levels. Conflicts exist between one student group and another, between students and staff, between students and university authority and between staff and university authority. University authority includes university management, council and the Visitor. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, staff at both senior and junior levels and both academic and non-academic, are organized into labour unions for the purpose of protecting the interest and wellbeing of their members. Olaleye and Arogundade (2013) articulated four forms of conflict to include intra-personal, inter-personal, intra-group and inter-group conflict. Conflicts become inter-personal or inter-group when they take the form of open actions such as hostile reactions or strike actions against other persons or group. Until the open hostility is manifested, it remains at the level of intra-personal problem.

Ejiogu (1990) quoted in Ndum and Okey (2013) identified three major types of conflicts:

- Conflict due to hierarchy of positions. This may take the form of subordinate conflict, between the boss and his subordinates, such as between lecturers and students. It may be super-ordinate conflict between an administrator and an authority over him e.g. between the Vice Chancellor and the Visitor. It may equally take the form of lateral conflict between an administrator and his peer, for example between the Vice Chancellors of two universities.
- Conflict based on the relationship between the objective state of affairs and the perceived state of affairs by conflicting parties. This conflict could be veridical, contingent, displaced, misattributed or latent.
- Conflict based on antagonistic source, such as conflict between cultural values and institutional expectations, role expectation and personality roles deriving from personality discord.

Conflict has both negative and positive effects. It can be negative and dysfunctional when it degenerates into violent and destructive behaviour (Amason, (1996). Conflict fosters distrust, resistance to change, antagonism, disruption of academic programmes and wastage of human and material resources (Fisher, 2010; Hotepo et al, 2010; Ayodele and Adewumi, 2007; Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015). Many researchers however agree that conflict has positive effects. Robins (1998) cited in Ndum and Okey (2013) asserts that conflict is a positive force and necessary for effective performance. It is essential for group formation and for progress; it fosters critical evaluation, innovation and change (DeChurch and Marks, 2001; Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015). Shur (2007) asserts that conflict can lead to a new social or political organization and therefore be productive, if the parties involved are able to deal with their incompatibilities so that such a new organizational form is achieved.

Ajike, et al. (2015) discern three distinct views that have evolved over the years about conflicts in organizations. According to them, these include traditional view, behavioural or contemporary view and interactionist view. The traditional view, which was dominant from the late 19th century until mid-1940s, assumes that conflict is bad and must always be avoided because of its negative impact, which leads to decline in performance as the level of conflict increases. This approach, Ajike, et al. (2015) observed, was not generally effective even though it worked sometimes. When conflicts are suppressed, the root causes cannot be identified and the potentially positive aspects of conflict cannot emerge. The behavioural or contemporary view, also known as human relations approach emerged between late 1940s and the 1970s. It advocates acceptance of conflict, which is natural and inevitable in all organizations. Conflict, according to this view, may have either positive or negative effect, depending on how it is handled. Performance may increase with conflict up to a certain level, but may decline if left unresolved. The interactionist view assumes that conflict is necessary to increase performance and to keep organizations self-critical, viable, creative and innovative. Thus, while behavioural approach accepts conflict, interactionist view encourages conflict.

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria are categorized into universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, with distinct structures, functional mandates and modus operandi. Labour unions for academic and non-academic, and for both senior and junior staff, are in place in each of the categories to serve the interest of employees and have at various times been involved in conflict with the authorities. In the universities, the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and their junior staff counterpart of non-academic staff union (NASU) have severally declared trade disputes leading to strike action, as a result of unresolved conflicts with the authorities. However, the most frequent, the most far reaching and the most impactful are conflicts involving Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and Government as university proprietors. (Aidelunuoghene, 2014; Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015)

Universities in Nigeria are broadly classified into public and private universities. The public universities are made up of federal and state universities, established and controlled by federal and state governments respectively. Membership of ASUU covers both the federal and state universities, even though proprietary interests are separate. This makes conflicts involving ASUU and government far reaching, as strike and other industrial actions declared by the Union affect all public universities. ASUU negotiates key issues affecting federal universities with the federal government and agreements reached are expected to spill over to state universities. It follows that most of the conflicts involve ASUU and the federal government. Labour unionism is not allowed in private universities and their academic staff are not members of ASUU. This paper focuses on conflicts between ASUU and Government as proprietors of public universities and attempts to examine factors behind the persistence of conflicts and strategies for effective management.

2. Major causes of conflict between ASUU and the Federal Government

Over the past twenty-five years, there have been chains of conflicts between Academic Staff Unions of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal government, which have led to periodic disruptions of academic programmes in Nigerian universities (Mukoro, 2013; Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015; Adeyemi and Ademilua, 2012). These conflicts are attributable to a wide range of issues, which can be classified into four categories. These include (i) Funding of the system; (ii) University autonomy, (iii) Conditions of service and (iv) Politics and national issues (Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015; Oyeniran, 2013; Ndum and Okey, 2013; Aidelunuoghene, 2014).

2.1. Funding Of University System

Oyeniran (2013) took a retrospective look at education funding in Nigeria and observed that the general economic downturn of the 1980s resulted in instability and financial inadequacy for the Nigerian educational system. Since the oil crisis in the eighties, the proportion of capital budget allocated to education has been consistently lower than the proportion of recurrent expenditure and over the years, the government capital expenditure allocated to education as a percentage of total capital budget ranged from as low as 1.71% in 1999 and in all cases below 9% (Oyeniran, 2013). The UNESCO (2000) World Education Report presents the data for nineteen countries across sub-Saharan Africa for 1996. The average share of GDP was 4.7% and of government expenditure was 19.6%. In both cases, the measures of educational expenditures for Nigeria, which recorded 2.3% and 14.3% respectively fall below average.

The direct consequences of inadequate funding of the universities (and other educational institutions) is fast deterioration of infrastructural facilities, including lecture halls, laboratories and halls of resident. Vital laboratory equipment and up-to-date library books and journals as well as e-learning facilities are grossly in short supply. Oyeniran (2013) presents a common phenomenon where students sit on bare floor or hang by the window side because lecture rooms cannot accommodate them. The issue of funding has been a major source of crisis between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government. ASUU went on strike in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2009 to press home its demand for increased funding for the university system (Aina, Awolusi and Odunlami, 2015). The inability of the Federal Government to implement the 26% ASUU-FGN negotiation of 1992 and 2001 has remained a source of conflict between ASUU and the Federal Government to date (Oyeniran, 2013).

2.2. University Autonomy

The concept of university autonomy, though as old as university education system in Nigeria, has remained a thorny and unresolved issue between ASUU and the Federal Government. The 1992 ASUU-FGN agreement and subsequent agreements and MOUs provided for university autonomy and academic freedom and in 2003, the University Miscellaneous Act was passed by the National Assembly and signed into law by the former President Olusegun Obasanjo. This Act was expected to bring to an end all controversial issues concerning university autonomy, including appointment of Vice Chancellors and other principal officers, funding of universities, the constitution of University Governing Councils and freedom to take decisions concerning academic structures and programmes. In spite of the passage of the University Miscellaneous Act of 2003, the appointment of Vice Chancellors and other key officers of the universities, both at federal and state levels, have continued to be politically influenced by the Chief Executives and has remained a major source of conflict (Idumanje, 2002 cited in Aina et al (2015)). Sanda (1992) views academic freedom as freedom to organize the university, design and structure the programmes, associate with others, hold and exchange ideas without any fear of victimization or harassment and challenge established orthodoxies without any fear of contradiction, all in the pursuit of truth. However, such incidence as outright ban on university staff and student associations, premature retirement, or rationalization of programmes as a result of government overregulation all result in decreasing autonomy (Alabi, 2002 cited in Aina et al (2015)).

2.3. Conditions of Service

Although ASUU does not place the issue of enhanced conditions of service in the forefront of its demands on government to avoid negative public reactions, the question of brain drain and the need to upgrade university staff service conditions to international standard has continued to re-echo in ASUU-FGN negotiations (Ayodele and Adewumi, 2007). Ekundayo (2012) holds the view that the wide gap between the remuneration of university lecturers in Nigeria and their counterparts in other parts of the world accounts for the persistent crisis between the unions and government.

2.3.1. Politics and National Issues

Government exerts a lot of influence on university administration. The appointment of key officers, such as Vice Chancellors, by the President and Governors for federal and state universities respectively have political undertone. The Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Education and National Universities Commission (NUC), controls the structure, curriculum, budget and calendar of the universities. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), a creation of the Federal Government, controls and manipulates admission to tertiary institutions in Nigeria. With such overwhelming influence over university administration with political coloration, conflict is bound to exist between ASUU and government, particularly where the leadership of the union has opposing political leaning. Again, ASUU's functional objectives cover issues that border on socio-economic wellbeing of the generality of the masses. It is for this reason that unpopular government policies and programmes, which precipitate adverse reactions from national labour unions, equally receive strong resistance from ASUU. Examples include the issue of subsidy removal and hike in fuel prices by the immediate past regime, as well as the annulment of June 12, 1993 Presidential election.

After unsuccessful efforts, including warning strike, aimed at obtaining positive reactions from government, ASUU on 13th August, 2017 declared an indefinite strike to express its grievance against the Federal Government for non-implementation of the 2013 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Union and the Federal Government, as well as the 2009 agreement (The Nation, 2017). Other demands as expressed in ASUU document include:

- Provision of funds for rehabilitation of public universities.
- Payment of outstanding salaries and earned allowances.
- Registration of Universities' Pension Management Company and pension matters.
- Reopening of Universities Staff Schools to be funded by Government as part of universities.

The strike action was called off after about six weeks disruption of University academic programmes, following series of negotiations between the Union and Government representatives.

3. The Concept of Conflict Management

Rahim (2002) defines conflict management as the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict, while increasing the positive aspects. Shur (2007) makes a distinction between conflict resolution and conflict management. He argues that conflict resolution theorists address the deep-rooted sources of conflict, which are taken to be structural and cultural and have ontological base in human needs, the denial of which causes violent conflict (Fetherston, 2002 in Shur, 2007). Quoting Bloomfield and Reilly, 1998, Shur, 2007 defined conflict management as the positive and constructive handling of differences and divergence of interests.

While conflict resolution seeks to eliminate or terminate all forms and types of conflict, conflict management promotes intervention and discussion to achieve political settlements. It is concerned with more realistic question of managing conflict, which involves designing and implementing a practical system in which opposing parties are brought together for constructive and cooperative management of differences. Ajike et al (2015) see conflict management as the practice of identifying and handling conflict in a sensible, fair and efficient manner, which requires effective communication, problem solving and negotiating skills. In an organizational setting, conflict management increases organizational learning and creative thinking by increasing the number of questions asked and encouraging people to challenge the status quo (Luthans, Rubach and Marsnik, 1995).

4. Conflict Management Strategies

Management scholars and researchers have identified various styles and strategies for management of conflict (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Pruitt, 1983; Borisoff and Victor, 1989; Amason, 1996; Alper, Tjosvold and Law, 2000; Kuhn and Poole, 2000; Fisher, 2010). Quoting Rose et al (2006), Ajike et al (2015) identified Blake and Mouton (1964) as the first management scholars to conceptualize the classification of conflict management styles into five, namely: avoiding, obliging, dominating, compromising and integrating. Other writers and researchers have similar classifications with varying shades and perspectives.

Thomas (1978) quoted in Hicks and Gullett (1981) avers that all responses to conflict situation involve degrees of assertiveness (trying to satisfy one's own concerns) and degrees of cooperativeness (trying to satisfy another's concerns). The combination of these two kinds of behaviour at varying degrees result in five common conflict management styles, similar to those identified by Blake and Mouton (1964). The first is avoiding, a conflict management strategy, which seeks to delay, ignore, or put off conflict indefinitely with the hope that the problem resolves itself without a confrontation. Although avoiding is often associated with position of low power or low esteem, it can sometimes be a useful conflict management strategy, for example, after dismissal of a popular but unproductive employee, the hiring of a more productive replacement for the position may placate the conflict situation created by the dismissal.

The second strategy identified by Thomas (1978) is accommodation. Accommodation, also referred to as smoothing, is a conflict management strategy which seeks to accommodate the concerns of opposing party first of all, rather than one's own concerns. It locates at the extreme axis of cooperativeness and depicts a position of apparent weakness, which may negatively affect one's ability to respond to aggressive opponent. However, accommodation can be usefully used if the circumstance requires buying time for a better position to respond, or reassess the situation from another angle. It can be used where the issue at stake is not as important to one party as it is to the other. An example is in the Nigerian banking industry, which requires formal dress code, but many banks allow casual dresses on Fridays to satisfy the yening of generality of staff. At the extreme axis of assertiveness is competition, also known as forcing, which operates as a zero-sum game, in which one side wins and the other loses. One party to the conflict, with assertive personalities, uses whatever power at its disposal to satisfy its concerns without regard to the concerns of the other party. Forcing or competing strategy can be effectively used in few conflict situations, such as when less-forceful methods don't work, or there is need to stand up for one's own right, or when force is required for a quick resolution in the face of apparent threat to healthy corporate existence.

Another alternative approach is compromising, which seeks for mutually acceptable solution that is partially satisfactory to both parties but completely satisfactory to neither party. Compromising, which produces faster resolution of conflict, may be appropriate in a situation where temporary settlement of complex issues is required, or as a first step when parties involved have not yet developed reasonable level of mutual trust. However, compromising may result in a lose-lose situation, where both parties are not satisfied with the outcome. It may not contribute to building trust in the long run and may require close monitoring and control to ensure that the parties respect the agreement. Finally, collaboration is a problem-solving strategy, which seeks a win-win solution that most satisfies the concerns of both parties to the conflict (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Rose et al, 2006; Hicks and Gullett, 1981). This strategy sees conflict management as an opportunity to achieve a mutually beneficial result by identifying the concerns of the conflicting parties and finding solution that meets the expectations of the parties. Collaboration is feasible where a long-term relationship is important and there exists a high level of mutual trust.

The five conflict management strategies, as discussed above, have their merits and demerits. Rahim (2002) noted that there is agreement among management scholars that there is no one best approach to how to make decisions, lead or manage conflicts. Each of the strategies can be usefully applied to effectively address a conflict situation, depending on the circumstances, the environmental factors, the nature of the conflict and the parties to the conflict (Pruitt, 1983; Hicks and Gullett, 1981; Blake and Mouton, 1964). The success or failure of any strategy depends on the situation. Where a wrong

strategy is adopted, effective resolution of conflict becomes unachievable. This is the problem with the management of conflict between Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Government.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

As noted earlier, a major cause of persistent conflict, leading to series of strike action by ASUU is the failure of the Federal Government of Nigeria to honour and implement previous agreements and memorandum of understanding. Negotiations are taken for granted by Government. More often than not, Government negotiating team is headed by a non-executive who has no power to commit the Government. At one point in time, Government may adopt avoiding strategy, ignoring threats and warnings from ASUU with the hope that delay will bring solution. At some other time, Government may resort to forcing strategy, using the threat of "no work, no pay" in an effort to intimidate the workers.

Given the parties concerned in ASUU/Government conflicts, the issues involved and the devastating effect of ineffective conflict management on national socio-economic wellbeing of the nation, it is recommended that a collaboration strategy is adopted in managing ASUU/Government conflicts. The academic staff of any university collectively constitute the livewire of that institution and any strike action by the union completely paralyses the functioning of the institution. The role of universities in the development of manpower of any nation cannot be overemphasized and key issues in ASUU demands on government include adequate funding and proper administration of Nigerian universities. On balance, both ASUU and Government have a shared long-term objective of sustained economic growth and development of Nigeria through institutional reforms. By adopting collaborative conflict management strategy, a long-term solution with mutually beneficial results will be achieved.

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