
Positive Aspects of Conflicts in Organisations

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ABSTRACT

The paper focussed on benefits derivable from conflicts in organisations, through their proper management. The major objective of the paper among others was to determine the role of organisational conflicts in strengthening group cohesiveness, through the application of the positive aspects of conflicts in decision making. The methodology adopted in the study was the library/desktop approach, which involved extensive consultations of secondary data, based on the theoretical nature of the paper. The conclusion of the study was that, conflicts have positive aspects, which can only be discovered by organisational members, by coming together to analyze and address the conflict situation with a view to getting the best from the positive aspects. Recommendations given at the end of the paper were: Organisations should see work place conflicts as natural developments and think of their positive aspects and develop strategies to gain from same with reasonable effort put in place to minimize their negative aspects rather than dwell on them. Also, Organisations should confront conflicts with objective mind-set with a view to addressing them and getting the best from their positive aspects rather than avoid them. Finally, Organisations should see work place conflicts as a learning field capable of improving quality of decisions, stimulating involvements in discussions and building stronger workgroups rather than allow them cause disintegrations among workgroups.

Keywords: Workplace Conflicts, Positive Aspects of Conflicts, Organisations and Group Cohesiveness.

Introduction

The working environments of organisations differ from one to another. The environment of a particular organisation certainly influences the type of attitude the workers there will come up with, in the course of performing their routine tasks.

Also, depending on the way it is handled, conflict may either help cool down a heated environment or worsen situations in an environment already heated. So, each member of an organisation must contribute something unique towards the achievement of a common goal at every point. It is the contributions from each member, put together that form the entity called organisation. Meanwhile, Dentsh (1973) asserted that

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“as people come together to work, conflicts arise from several incompatible issues, activities and states”. Obisi (2005) also emphasised that, “conflicting issues are not new in industrial organisations”. And this remains unarguable, judging from the fact that workers and management must at one point or the other have incompatible, conflicting or irreconcilable views on issues that could lead to conflict, even in the course of trying to get the best for their organisation. Rayesky and Bryant (1994), in this regard, believed that the tension of well managed conflict allows team to confront disagreements through healthy discussions to improve quality of decisions made.

What then, is the true situation as regards organisations and conflicts; they are better described as, “best friends at war”, fighting to discover ways of improving their mutual relationship.

Problem Identification

The problem identified by this paper is the perceived non-recognition to the simple fact by many, that not all conflict is bad. We live in a society where people tend to view conflicts only from the negative perspectives; giving little or no attention at all to specific conflicts, to discover whether there could be anything good capable of coming out from them.

Robinson and Clifford (1974) stated that, “not all conflict is bad, and not all cooperation is good”. So, a situation where people tend to view conflict only as a negative force that works against the successful completion of group tasks or achievement of group goals is already a problem and therefore not acceptable.

Based on the above, this paper opines that members of work groups should also see conflicts as good opportunities to address critical issues rather than maintain the negative status quo that conflict is bad perpetually; whereas it could also be a learning field, for improving quality of decisions (Dibie, 2011 p. 45).

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to create a platform (by way of contributing to existing relevant literatures) where people can begin to see some positive aspects of organisational conflicts. Basically, the paper will among other things:

1. Determine whether organisational conflicts actually have positive aspects.
2. Determine how the positive aspects of organisational conflicts can be discovered.

3. Determine the role of organisational conflicts in strengthening group cohesiveness, through the application of the positive aspect of conflicts in decision making.

Methodology

Considering the theoretical nature of this paper, the library/desktop approach was adopted. This approach involved extensive consultations of secondary data which formed the basis for the paper and conclusion drawn.

Literature Review

Conceptual Issues and Definitions

"Conflict situations appear with frequency in daily public and private life. These conflicts may be in a small or a large scale. They may occur within and among work groups, communities or nations. They may be triggered by ethnic, racial, religious or economic differences, or arise from differences in values, beliefs and attitudes, regarding issues." (Dibie, 2011). So, whatever the dimension of the conflict, among whatever persons or groups it occurs and whatever the causes might be, conflict is conflict. What should be considered important in every conflict should be the drive to determine what good thing should come out of it and reasonable effort put in to achieve same.

Imhonopi and Ederhi (2007) defined conflict as, "a situation or event of disagreement between two or more parties to an agreement." Along the same line, Wall and Callister (1995) defined conflict as, "a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. Meanwhile, Rahim (1992, P. 16) noted that conflict is "the interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities." And along similar line of reasoning, Imhonopi and Ederhi (2007) argued that, "conflict is a situation or an event of disagreement between two or more parties to an agreement."

While no single definition of the term conflict may actually exist, any definition you can find would involve at least two independent parties or groups, who perceive some incompatibility between or among themselves in the course of their interactions in some ways, (Putnam and Poole, 1987), with modifications.

Causes of Conflicts in Organisations

Organisational conflicts most times result, when there is a behaviour from a person or group, intended to obstruct the achievement of the goal of another person or group. So, conflict as noted earlier is a product of incompatibility of goals and it arises from opposing behaviours. It can be viewed from the individual, group or organisational levels.

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There are several causes of conflicts in different organisations. Rahim (2002, p. 207) noted that conflict may occur when:

- i. A party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests.
- ii. A party holds behavioural preferences, the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preference.
- iii. A party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of all parties involved may not be satisfied fully.
- iv. A party possesses attitudes, values, skills and goals that are salient in directing his or her behaviour but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills and goals held by the other(s).
- v. Two parties have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint actions.
- vi. Two parties are independent in the performance of functions or activities.

Mullins (1999) identified three potential sources of conflicts in organisations. These sources and their potential areas of conflict include:

- i. Individual – such as attitude, personality, characteristics, needs, illness and stress.
- ii. Group – such as group skills, the informal organisation and group norms.
- iii. Organisation – such as communications, authority structure, leadership style and management behaviour.

Conflict Management

It should be noted that conflict management is not the same thing as conflict resolution, for the purpose of this paper. While conflict resolution involves the reduction, elimination or termination of all forms of conflict; Rahim (2002, p. 208) emphasised that conflict management minimizes the negative outcomes of conflict and promotes the positive outcomes, with the goal of improving learning in an organisation.

Organisational learning is very important for the healthy growth of the organisation. Properly managed conflict increases the amount of questions asked and encourages people to challenge the status quo (Luthans, Rubach and Marsnik, 1995).

For the purpose of this paper again, we define conflict management as the critical examination of a conflict situation, to determine the causes, aspects (positive and negative) in order to work out strategies to minimize the negative aspects and promote the positive aspects for the mutual good of the parties involved.

There are several approaches for managing organisational conflicts. The best approach however, lies in the hands of the group members who are poised to analysing and addressing the conflict situation objectively and with a view to getting the best from the positive aspects (Dibie, 2011, p. 44).

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The existence of conflicts in organisations is inevitable since members of work groups come from diverse backgrounds and with varied behaviours and interests. What is therefore required in every conflict situation as earlier stated, is to critically examine the situation, determine the causes as well as the aspects (positive and negative); and work out strategies to minimize the negative aspects and promote the positive aspects.

Some of these are highlighted as follows:

- i. **They Help To Improve Organisational Decisions:** Well managed conflicts create tension which allows teams to confront disagreements through healthy discussions for improved quality of decisions made (Rayeski and Bryant, 1994).
- ii. **They Help To Improve Organisational Learning:** Well managed conflicts minimize the negative outcomes of conflicts and promote the positive outcomes, with the goal of improving learning in organisations (Rahim, 2008, p. 208).
- iii. **They Help Organisational Members To Ask Relevant Questions:** Well managed conflicts increases learning by increasing the amount of questions asked and encourages people to challenge the status quo (Luthans, Rubach and Marsnik, 1995).
- iv. **They Help To Create Organisational Stability:** The compromise technique being one of the techniques for handling conflicts, according to Thomas (1976), help warring parties to come together in readiness to give up something to get a problem solved; and further create opportunity for stability in the organisation.
- v. **They Help To Strengthen Relationships Among Organisational Members:** The collaboration technique, being another technique among others, suggested by Thomas (1976) for handling conflicts, creates a platform for organisational members to meet and mutually satisfy the needs of each other, thereby strengthening their work relationships.

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Summary and Conclusion

This paper observed that the environment of an organisation influences the behaviours of members of that organisation. It noted that as people come together to work, conflicts must arise from several incompatible issues, activities and states. It is clear that conflict is not "something" as bad as many tend to see it, but the way it is managed to get the best out of it should be the issue of utmost concern.

The paper discovered that there are several causes of organisational conflict, since members come from diverse background and with varied interests.

It highlighted that there are several approaches to managing these conflicts and that the best approach however lies in the hands of the group members, who are in a better position to analyse and address the conflict situation, to get the best from the positive aspects.

In conclusion, conflicts have positive aspects which can only be discovered by organisational members, by coming together to analyse and address the conflict situation, with a view to getting the best from the positive aspects.

Recommendations

For organisations to benefit maximally from the conflicts rather than see them only as "existing devils", the following recommendations are given:

1. Organisations should see work place conflicts as natural developments and think of their positive aspects and develop strategies to gain from same, with reasonable effort put in place to minimize their negative aspects; rather than dwell on them.
2. Also, organisations should confront conflicts with objective mind-set, with a view to addressing them and getting the best from their positive aspects; rather than avoid them.
3. Finally, organisations should see work place conflicts as a learning field, capable of improving quality of decisions, stimulating involvements in discussions and building stronger workgroups, rather than allow them cause disintegrations among workgroups.

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