Conflict Management Strategy in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

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Abstract: *Conflict today has become part of organizations. This is more so in an organization as a university with a structure that allows two or more units or groups to share functional boundaries in achieving its set objectives. In universities, people with differing nature -students, lecturers and administrative staff -have to work harmoniously together. Hence, the organizational structure is such that staff and staff, students and students, and staff and students share functional boundaries of exchange of knowledge. Correlation analysis (i.e. Pearson Product Moment Correlation) was employed to show the existence of the relationship between conflict management strategy and employee performance. This paper investigated conflict management strategy in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. The findings of this study revealed that Conflict management strategy will significantly improve employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria and that there is a significant relationship between conflict management strategy and effective administration planning in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. This paper recommends that university authorities should adopt dialogue strategy and all the others found in this study to be effective in managing role conflict in Nigeria universities.*

Keywords: Conflict, management, Strategy, Distance Learning Institute, Conflict management strategy.

1. Introduction

Conflict is a situation of disagreement between two parties. A conflict situation is therefore one that is characterized by the inability of those concerned to iron out their differences. Conflict is an evitable feature of organizational life. The state of health of an organisation lies along a continuum that ranges from a conflict - free organisation to a conflict ridden organization. Organisation like the universities is not immune from conflict. This is because, in any circumstances where two or more people co-exist to form an organization conflict is anticipated. The modern university system comprises a variety of communities based on the wide range of academic disciplines and functions. Its Internal behaviour constitutes a very complex organism shaped by these many hands.

The nature and character of the university as an academic organization entails the achievement and maintenance of a harmonious environment conducive for the working together of various groups of staffs and the management team for the attainment of preselected missions and objectives. However, in recent years, the industrial relations terrain in the Nigerian University system has been saturated with series of industrial conflicts with consequent adversities on the advancement of knowledge (Alabi, 2002).

Conflict today has become part of organizations. This is more so in an organization as a university with a structure that allows two or more units or groups to share functional boundaries in achieving its set objectives. In universities, people with differing nature -students, lecturers and administrative staff - have to work harmoniously together. Hence, the organizational structure is such that staff and staff, students and students, and staff and students share functional boundaries of exchange of knowledge.

Conflict is a struggle over claims, values and scarce resources. It is inevitable among individuals and in organizations because of the nature of human beings who differ in value orientation, attitudes and levels of understanding. Conflicts have become part of human organizations the world over. There are two major types of conflicts, internal and external. Internal conflict occurs between employees and their employers while external conflict occurs between employees and other bodies outside the organization such as the government. Examples of internal conflicts abound between management and their employees in the universities while external conflicts occur between the university unions and the federal government. External conflicts seem to be the crux of the crises in the universities and they occur at alarming rates due to the diverse nature of the parties involved. Thus, this paper is poised at investigating conflict management strategy in distance learning institute in Nigeria.

Statement of Problems of the Study

Conflicts have adverse effect on management and administration of Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. These conflicts may have had effects on the work effectiveness of university staff resulting in low morale, inaction, frustration, lack of commitment and low productivity. The incessant conflicts resulting in strikes and closure of universities revolve round the non-implementation of agreements between the university staff and the federal government. Most conflicts have had immediate effects of distortion of academic calendar in the university leading to fatigue and lowering of professional standard. The constant resort to conflict resulting in the closure of the universities

can now be referred to as a vicious cycle of strike, negotiation, arriving at agreement, postponing strike, waiting, nonimplementation of agreement, warning strike, and full blown strike.

Unresolved conflicts in the universities seemed to have resulted in serious consequences on staff effectiveness such as employee low turnover, low morale, reduced productivity, quality problems, reduced collaboration, passive/aggressive behavior, inefficient management credibility, negative upward attention and distrust (Cram & MacWilliams, 2011). The purpose of this study is to examine conflict management strategy in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

This study is aimed at examining conflict management strategy in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. Other objectives are as follows;

➤ Find out whether there is a significant relationship between conflict management strategy and employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.
➤ Discover whether there is a significant relationship between conflict management strategy and administration planning in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.
➤ Recommend on how to address conflict management challenges in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for testing.

1. Ho: Conflict management strategy will not significantly improve employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

2. Ho: There is no significant relationship between conflict management strategy and

2. Review of Literature

Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing its positive aspects (Rahim, 2002). It is the principle that all conflicts cannot necessarily be resolved, but learning how to manage conflicts can decrease the odds of nonproductive escalation. Daniel, (2001) asserts that conflict management entails the long term management of intractable conflicts. He further explained that it is the variety of ways by which people handle grievances standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Conflict management therefore involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills, and establishing a structure

for resolving conflict in the environment. It is a process that embraces all articulated strategies, interventions and institutional mechanisms in controlling the escalation of conflict.

Organizations like the universities need to operate in peaceful environments where there is a high level of understanding, tolerance, and compromise among administrators, other staff and students, and unions. Where this exists, conflicts are minimized, and there is always greater commitment and high productivity which in turn leads to better provision of services and overall organizational development. It is alleged that bad-belly exits among professional and academic administrators in universities. It is believed that a major cause of this antagonism could be traced to the conflicts that manifest as a result of their roles as administrators of universities. The modern university system comprises a variety of communities based on the wide range of academic disciplines and functions involved therein. Its internal behavior constitutes a very complex organism shaped by these many hands. This implies that its entire life is extensively shaped by its internal logic, habits, and dynamics. It is also influenced by the challenges, constraints, and pressures bearing upon it from the outer environment. The university is therefore made up of people with different backgrounds almost certainly having different needs, skills, talents, aspirations, visions, missions, and status. They also probably possess and pursue different interests, values, competencies, knowledge, and behavioural styles. This also means that members of this complex social organization could exhibit different preemptions and aggressions.

Oluremi (2007) defined conflict management as all actions and mechanisms used by executives (or parties in conflict or independent third parties) to keep conflict from interfering with achievement of the enterprise's objective. Dijkstra (2006) maintained that conflicts in organizations arise as a result of goal incompatibility. The first step, therefore, in developing an effective strategy for conflict resolution in any context lies in recognizing the underlying goals that the parties are seeking in the process and accepting the legitimacy of their efforts to pursue their goals. To effectively curb role conflict there is need to understand how it works in organizations. Since role conflict is dynamic it passes through some stages which Yusuf and Kazeem (2007) classified as Frustration, Conceptualization, Role Conflict Behaviour, and Outcome. According to him, frustration arises from the attempts or actual actions at opposing, hindering or blocking the achievement of one's or a group's objectives/goals by another. Such frustrating activities could be denial of requests, promotion, incremental allowance etc as well as undermining of interests and sabotage; Conceptualization is the subjective stage of role conflict which is usually flittered through one's belief systems and values. At this stage the proposed actions and their consequences are considered; Role conflict behavior refers

to the action or reaction taken to address the role conflict. This can take the form of confrontation, attack and defeat or undermining or cooperation or appeasement as the case may be which may involve yielding to demands, making concessions, or accepting conditions, etc; Outcome is the actual consequence of the role conflict. It could be in the form of resolution through agreement and settlement (Yusuf and Kazeem, 2007).

According to him, three assumptions that underline role conflict – that conflict is endemic in organizations because of lack of consensus as to the expectations and prescriptions for rancour, organizational positions; and, lack of uniform commitment to organizational goals/objectives; that while some conflicts are detrimental others are beneficial from the stand points of both individual and organizational goals/objectives; and that the principle of minimizing conflict as subscribed to by some managers and social scientists makes valid the existence of crisis in organizations. These mean that the proper management of conflict will, require as the situation demands, bargaining, third party intervention, super-ordinate goals, removal of the key persons in the conflict via transfer or termination of appointment (used as a last resort), appeal to hierocracy, appeal to higher authority, and the use of Ombudsman and the alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism. He further explained that bargaining is a process whereby two or more parties appear to settle what each will give and take or perform and receive. It involves the presentation of demands or proposals by one of the parties and the evaluation of these by the other party or parties followed by counter proposals and concessions. The ultimate objective of bargaining is an agreement acceptable to both parties, that specifies how a specific role/resources is to be divided and or how a particular issue (role conflict) is to be resolved.

Tanner (2000) identified five conflict management strategies: competitive; collaborative; compromising; avoiding; and accommodating. However, Gross & Guerrero (2000) opined that the dual thrust model of conflict management is based on two underlying themes: pro-self (that is concern for self) or pro-social (that is concern for others) goals and that the interaction between these two themes gives rise to the five conflict management strategies which are:

a) *Avoidance conflict management strategy*: Conflict manager who adopt this style allow the conflict to phase out on its own through inaction and passivity. This conflict management approach is usually adopted when the manager is not concerned about their own outcomes (pro-self) or that of others (pro-social) (Yamagishi, 2017). Avoiding has the advantage of giving time to better prepare and collect information before acting and is a low stress approach when the conflict duration is short. On the other hand, withdrawing may lead to weakening or losing of position as it may be interpreted as agreement, which may make matters worse. Where there are many stakeholders, withdrawing may negatively affect relationship with another party that expects the action of the conflict manager.

Also important decisions may end up being made by default.

b) *Yielding conflict management strategy*: Also termed accommodating or smoothing approach. It is adopted when conflict managers are determined to meet the needs of others and have a general concern for maintaining stable, positive social relationships and harmony (Forsyth, 2009). It sometimes enhances the protection of more important interests while giving up on less important ones, as well as provides the opportunity of reassessing the situation from other angles. The approach could leave the adopter subject to abuse as opponents may always expect shifting of grounds in their favour. This strategy may turn off some supporters as credibility and influence can be lost.

c) *Competitive conflict management strategy*: This approach involves the use of force to get the other party to accept the conflict manager's view. This strategy maximizes self-assertiveness and minimizes empathy (that is concern for others). The conflict managers see conflict as a challenge of win or lose. The benefits of this approach are that it provides a quick resolution to a conflict and increases self-esteem. However, the shortcomings of this style are that it could escalate the conflict and the relationship between the parties would be negatively affected. This approach might require a lot of expenses or resources and does not allow the conflict manager to take advantage of the strong points of the opponent's position. More so, losers might want to retaliate.

d) *Cooperation conflict management strategy*: Also termed collaborating approach. It is adopted when the conflict managers are highly interested in both their own outcomes and the outcomes of others. This style sees conflict as a creative opportunity of which investment in time and resources could find a win-win solution (Forsyth, 2009). It might require structural changes as other possible alternatives in resolving the conflict are reviewed given available information at hand and unwanted options are discarded. Decisions usually take careful consideration and analysis. The merits of this approach are that it pilots actual problem solving, reinforces mutual trust and respect, and provides a base for effective future collaboration, Notwithstanding, the pickle of all parties must be committed to finding a mutually acceptable solution and this might be more tasking and time consuming compared to other methods. Also this strategy might be impractical when a quick response is needed.

e) *Conciliation conflict management strategy*: Also termed compromising approach. It is adopted when conflict managers' value fairness and in doing so, anticipate mutual give-and-take interactions. This approach enhances faster issue resolution, reduces tension and friction till a win-win solution could be achieved. However the cons are that it could result in a loss-loss situation if initial demands are too

great. It also does not contribute to trust building in the long run as it could spawn cynicism if there is no commitment to honour. Important values and long term objectives could be derailed in the process. This strategy requires close monitoring and control to ensure agreements are met. It is pertinent to state here that effective conflict management strategies are not completely determined by concerns for self or concern for others but might be sensitive to value judgment of other variables such as culture, value system, religious belief etc., hence the use of traditional rulers and clergies in conflict resolution.

The key points in all these strategies are effective communication methods, preventive methods, and leadership techniques methods. Open communication allows the honest confrontation of differences between persons which can take the forms of: I win – you lose; I want out, I will withdraw; I will give in for good relations; I will meet you half-way; I can care and confront. Preventive methods involve establishing from the outset, organizational conditions which stimulate collaboration rather than competition while leadership techniques strategies adopt techniques of supportive leadership and the development of high mutual influence among people which provide a counter balance to the probability of conflict. Scholars (Fashoyin, 2002; Burach, 2001; Dalrendorf, 2000; Glueck, 2000) revealed some basic administrative skills necessary in minimizing probabilities of conflict. These include the need to have sufficient technical skill to accomplish the mechanism of the particular job for which the administrator is responsible; sufficient human skill in working with others to be an effective group member and to be able to build cooperative effort within the team he leads; sufficient conceptual skill to recognize the inter-relationships of the various factors involved in his situation, which will lead him to take the action that is most likely to achieve the maximum good for the organization; sufficient advanced planning and co-ordination in especially over-bureaucratic forms of organization.

3. Methodology

Method

This study is a descriptive research design carried out in three distance learning institute in Nigeria namely University of Lagos, University of Abuja and University of Ibadan. The population of this study were faculty members and senior management staff of the selected distance learning institute in Nigeria. 120 respondents participated in this study comprises of academic staff and non-academic staff of the three selected institutions. The copies of the questionnaire were delivered to the respondent and 100 valid copies of the questionnaire were returned giving 83% response rate.

Model

The model as stated below was used to analyze the study:

Employee performance = f(Conflict management strategy)

Where:

Employee Performance = employee productivity

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was employed and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between variables and the level of significance was set at p-value <0.05. Correlation analysis (i.e. Pearson Product Moment Correlation) was employed to show the existence of the relationship between conflict management strategy and employee performance, while regression is used to determine the amount of variations in the dependent variable which can be associated with changes in the value of an independent or predictor variable in the absence of other variables.

4. Data Presentation and Interpretation

1. Research Hypothesis Testing:

Ho: Conflict management strategy will not significantly improve employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

Table 1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error Estimate
1	.742a	.551	.534	.278

a. **Predictors: (Constant), Conflict Management Strategy**

This was tested using correlation coefficients test. Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient of 0.742 indicates that conflict management strategy and employee performance are significantly and positively correlated with each other at 95% level of significance. Therefore the Null hypothesis of no significant relationship is rejected. Thus, it can be concluded that conflict management strategy will significantly improve employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. Finding above is in agreement with Rahim (2011) assertion that Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing its positive aspects. It is the principle that all conflicts cannot necessarily be resolved, but learning how to manage conflicts can decrease the odds of nonproductive escalation among employee.

2. Research Hypothesis Testing:

Ho: There is no significant relationship between conflict management strategy and administration planning in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria.

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error Estimate
1	.742a	.551	.534	.278

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	1.171	1	1.171	1.881	.001a
Residual	45.416	73	.622		
Total	46.587	74			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Conflict management strategy
b. Dependent Variable: Administration Planning

Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	2.077	.355	1.59	5.855	.000
Conflict Mgt Strategy	1.122	.089		1.372	.001

a. *Dependent Variable: Administration Planning*

The hypothesis was tested through the regression analysis using the results in table 2 above. As seen in the ANOVA table, there is a significant and positive relationship between conflict management strategy and administration planning with F-value of 1.881. This indicates that the fitted regression equation is significant and the model is a good one. The significant value of 0.000 which is less than 0.005 shows a significant relationship between the variables at 95% level of significance. The outcome of the testing of hypothesis two indicates that conflict management strategy actually influenced administration planning of workers in distance learning institute with coefficient of 1.122. Thus, it can therefore be confirmed that the null hypothesis of no significant relationship is rejected. Therefore it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between conflict management strategy and administration planning in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. The R2 value of 0.551 means that 55.1% of the total variability in administration planning of workers in distance learning institute can be explained by conflict management strategy.

Findings above is consistent with FAO (2018) assertion that a planning team faces several forms of conflict. First are disagreements within the planning team and its advisory committees.. Second are disagreements between the forestry agency and one or more interest groups. Third are disagreements between two or more interest groups external to the agency, but which need to be resolved in order for the planning to move forward. Depending on how well they are managed, these conflicts can be a productive aspect of the planning. They indicate the existence of multiple viewpoints, and the competition of ideas. But when serious conflicts are not resolved, they can totally destroy the planning process.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined conflict management strategy in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. The findings of this study revealed that Conflict management strategy will significantly improve employee performance in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria and that there is a significant relationship between Conflict management strategy and administration planning in Distance Learning Institute in Nigeria. This paper has given rise to the following recommendations.

1. It was therefore recommended that university authorities should adopt dialogue strategy and all the others found in this study to be effective in managing role conflict in Nigeria universities.

2. The academic and professional administrator should continue to demonstrate spirit of tolerance so as to ensure the smooth running of the University. Simple conflict situation should not be allowed to generate into crisis.

3. Conflict managers should always endeavour to establish the root cause(s) of the conflict if there is to be a true resolution and lasting peace.

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