THE UNAVOIDABLE PART: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Conflict is an unavoidable part of every institution. Educational institutions are saddled with conflicts among employees and sometimes with management which invariably influence their overall output. At the workplace, it is important that measures are put in place to ensure employees are comfortable and happy in their work environment to function well. The purpose of this study is to explore how unresolved conflicts between employees in educational institutions affect productivity. This study identifies some causes of conflict in colleges of Education and suggests possible ways of effectively resolve them for improved sustainable productivity. 22 respondents participated in the study. A qualitative research method was used, whereby semi structured interviews were conducted to collect data for analysis. The participants were asked certain question to determine the causes of conflict, and how they manage it. In analyzing the results, the responses were grouped into themes and then examined according to the questions asked during the interview. Based on the results, it was determined that a common cause of conflict in educational institutions is poor communication. With regards to managing conflict, it was determined that people prefer to talk to the other party and would only involve a third person if they are not able to solve the issue. Another reason they would also involve a third person is if the person is a colleague or an employer they are not friendly with. It was recommended that superiors in educational institutions should be approachable, and should also provide a formal complaint process that employees can use when they have any issues.

Keywords: conflict, conflict management, educational, institutions

Introduction

Educational institutions in our society play a vital role in equipping students with the requisite

knowledge, skills and the right attitudes via the curricula for healthy lifestyles. Accordingly, the

responsibilities of educational institutions include shaping the attitudes of students for the real

world by preparing them to deal or handle all manner of situations they may encounter in life,

including courtesy and good manners. Also, lecturers in such institutions are required to

influence and contribute to the development of society. In effect, educational institutions aim to make individuals useful members of society (Bahrami, 2018).

Just like any other corporate entity, educational institutions like the Colleges, have categories of employees with different roles and responsibilities and when played well, contribute to their effectiveness and growth. It is without doubt that these employees would not get along from time to time due to differences in perspectives, communication, values, personalities and experiences in life (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2006; Kudonoo, 2016). When such things happen, it is usually given the term conflict, because there is some disagreement between two employees or parties.

In the College, lecturers are expected to work closely with their heads of departments and with their teaching assistants. Unavoidably, conflicts spring up in these working relationships once a while because of the differences mentioned earlier on. According to Ghaffar (2009), school principals use the authoritative approach like pressurizing lecturers to complete specific tasks which can bring about conflict. Conflict can also occur between a lecturer and a teaching assistant. And most importantly, conflict can occur within an individual. For example, a lecturer that is experiencing internal conflict might find it difficult to relate well with his/her students as well as effectively teach them in most cases.

According to Pia and Diez (2007), conflict is a disagreement between two parties. 'Two parties' in this context could mean individuals, institutions, countries, or even within oneself. Conflict is a clash of ideas between two parties. We experience conflict every day of our lives, whether it is within ourselves or with the people around us. Concerning educational institutions, conflict occurs between teaching and non-teaching staff, between individuals or groups of employees, individuals or groups of employers, or individuals or groups of employees and employers. Even though there are several types of conflicts, there are specific types that occur within an

educational institution and they are intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and inter-institutional conflict.

 In a situation where there is conflict, there will be an effect on the individuals involved which are the teaching, and non-teaching staff. And if these individuals are affected, there could be an effect on their performance at work, which will reflect in students' performance as well as the institutions performance. It is at this point that a conflict resolution process should be implemented to ensure that conflicts are resolved so that the employees and the school can benefit.

There are various ways to manage conflict and the way it is handled makes it either positive or negative. Managing conflicts for positive results improves the relationship between colleagues, encourages innovation, creativity and new ideas, creates an environment of respect and change, provides a formal complaint process that can be used when there is conflict, amongst others (Kudonoo, Schroeder, & Boysen-Rotelli, 2012).

Educational institutions are living systems that use scarce resources to perform tasks (Bercovitch, 2014). The keywords in this definition are limited resources. Where there are limited resources, there is conflict because there are disagreements on how scarce resources should be shared (Ongori, 2009). According to Garcia (2013), conflict is embedded in an institution's system. Competition for power, resources, jobs, among others lead to conflict, which can be destructive for the institution if not managed properly. Even though conflict is viewed as negative, it also has its positive side. This is known as functional and dysfunctional conflict where functional conflict is positive and dysfunctional conflict is negative.

Functional conflict improves the performance of a group because arguments between group members brings about competition of ideas which causes them to arrive at more innovative

decisions. Dysfunctional conflict reduces a group's performance because of competition between individual positions, which sets aside the interest of the business (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). When there is conflict in institutions, they are compelled to find innovative ways to solve them and create change. Therefore, conflict serves as a stimulant for change to occur (Bercovitch, 2014). Deetz and Stevenson (1986), also support this theory by stating that conflict is managed well when innovative solutions are implemented.

Ultimately, conflict management and resolution are vital in the workplace. There are four types of conflicts that occur in educational institutions. They are intragroup, intergroup, intrapersonal, interpersonal and inter-institutional conflict. Intergroup conflict occurs between groups within an institution. Intragroup conflict occurs within groups in an institution. Intrapersonal conflict is when an individual's skills do not match their role in the institution. Interpersonal conflict is between individuals in the institution (Thakore, 2013). And inter institutional conflict is conflict between one institution and another (Isabu, 2017).

Sources of conflicts in institutions are becoming inexhaustible however, Isabu (2017) explains that, factors like poor communication, limited resources, overlapping authority, role conflict and task inter-dependence are causes of conflict in educational institutions. The breakdown of conflict, including the causes and types in educational institutions, provides evidence that the topic of conflict is much deeper than we think and would require a deeper understanding to effectively manage it. However, the effects of conflict are dependent on the way they are treated, resolved or managed. Hence this study seeks to explore the effects of conflict on employees in two Colleges and the influence it has on their productivity.

Conflict in the workplace is quite a problem for the parties involved, especially when it is not resolved. According to Bercovitch (2014), unresolved conflicts in institutions can lead to

devastating results, which is not healthy for the institution and the individuals that are involved. When there is conflict within and between lecturers or between lecturers and College staff, it has a rippling effect on students and the College. For example, a lecturer may find it difficult to carry out specific tasks assigned to him/her by his/her head of department if there is some form of disagreement. Teaching assistants may not be able to provide students with the right information if they are not on good terms with the lecturers they are assisting.

Departmental or intergroup conflict occurs for example, if the Registry and the Information Technology department are not working in harmony to yield expected results students are affected because they may not be able to enroll online for classes. Ensuring healthy lecturer relations and improving technology is not the only way to improve lecturers' performances. The institutional climate is another factor that must be considered if Colleges want to improve performance. It must be conducive for employees to function to the best of their abilities, which would benefit the students and the school (Garcia, 2013).

Ongori (2009) explains that the sharing of limited resources is a major cause of conflict. When resources are scarce, and employees are competing for those resources, it brings about disputes. When this happens, employees are not able to perform because they lack the necessary resources to perform their roles well. When there are not enough textbooks or teaching materials in Colleges, it makes it difficult for lecturers to prepare adequately for class and teach effectively, which can affect the students understanding of the course. On the other hand, when students fail to respect and appreciate the efforts made by their lecturers to equip them with the knowhow, they need to perform in the work world and general life, the teaching and learning process falls short of its essence. What then must management of educational institutions do to create a

conducive environment for employees (lecturers and other staff) to increase productivity? This is the focus of this study.

Research Questions

What are the causes of conflict in colleges of Education?

How does conflict affect the performance of employees in colleges of Education?

What should colleges of Education do to ensure effective conflict resolution for good human relations and improved productivity?

Method

The design of the study is based on qualitative research approach. This approach helps to provide an in-depth analysis of conflict and its effect. The study was conducted in Cameroon. The population used for the study was employees in Colleges of Education. The sample size was 22 participants, the employees that work at administration, the lecturers, and faculty interns, or teaching assistants. Semi-structured interviews was used to collect data. Semi-structured interviews was used because it allowed the researcher to focus on specific themes related to the research, making it easier to compare the answers provided by the participants. The following questions were asked during the interview: How do you manage conflict? Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with a difficult person. Was there a third party to help resolve the conflict between you and the person. Or did you have to cope? If you did, how did you handle the situation? When you are working in a team, how do you deal with differences in opinions and personalities. Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with difficult teammates. And how did it affect the performance of the team? Tell me about a situation where you had a problem with a colleague or coworker. What did you do to resolve the problem? Tell me about a situation where you had a problem with a colleague or coworker you were working

with on a project. What did you do to resolve the problem? How did you handle a disagreement you had with your boss? How does conflict outside the workplace affect your performance at the workplace? How does conflict with coworkers affect your performance at the workplace? The researcher interviewed research participants in Colleges of Education during the semester as a result, accessibility was no issue. Appointment was booked with them at their convenience for the interview sessions. For each interview, a total of 1 hour to interview each participant was spent. During the interviews, notes were taken down for each interviewee and recorded all that was being said. The notes were compiled each interview, and in addition, transcribed what was recorded. Notes were filtered by taking out all irrelevant information. In analyzing the data collected, data was categorized into short phrases to represent themes. By doing this, patterns that were words or phrases that were common in each interview were observed. Comparison of the findings with the literature was done for any similarities or differences. The comparison was also done to find out if there was any missing information; that is, information that I expected the interviewees to provide. The data was linked to the research questions to determine how relevant the data collected was for my study, and then summarized the data under each category to develop themes for the study.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the causes of conflict in colleges of Education?

Based on the questions that were asked during the interviews, the responses revealed what caused the conflict in the first place. The participants were asked about disagreements they had with their boss, and 17 participants stated that they were mostly misunderstandings due to lack of communication. Only 5 participants stated that some of their bosses mistreated them for no

reason giving the impression that they were just authoritative or they did not like them. Questions with regards to teamwork revealed that some conflicts existed because teammates were not cooperating.

Research Question 2

How does conflict affect the performance of employees in colleges of Education?

To determine how employees perform when there is conflict at the workplace, I asked them two questions concerning performance; "How does conflict outside the workplace affect your performance at the workplace?" and "How does conflict with coworkers affect your performance at the workplace?" For the first question, 10 participants stated that they can separate their work life from their personal life so, problems outside the workplace do not affect them. Only 2 participants stated that it would only affect them if the problem has to do with someone who is significant to them, for example a relative, close friend, etc. For the second question, 16 participants stated that it affects productivity if they must work directly with the person. But if they do not, then it does not affect them. And 6 participants said they would not focus on the conflict even if they are working directly with the person because they know it would affect their performance.

Research Question 3

What should colleges of Education do to ensure effective conflict resolution for good human relations and improved productivity?

Participants were asked how they manage conflict to understand how employees in educational institutions manage conflict. The responses were based on whether it was interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict. 17 participants out of 22 stated that if it is interpersonal conflict, they

would talk to the person to resolve it by working together to come up with a solution. Out of the 17 participants, 10 participants went on to say that if it does not work out, they would involve a third person. Just 7 participants stated that they would ignore the person and not bother to try and resolve it. When dealing with a difficult person, 12 participants stated that they would involve a third party to resolve it. And 10 participants stated they would only involve a third party if it was necessary. For intrapersonal conflict, all the participants responded that confiding in a third party, especially someone close to them like a relative or a very good friend is the best option.

Discussion of findings

Discussion of the results was based on the questions asked to participants during the interview.

How do you manage conflict?

This question was asked to determine how participants generally manage conflict. However, it was divided into two parts; interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. In dealing with interpersonal conflict, 17 participants stated that they would talk to the person to resolve the issue, and 12 participants out of the 17 said they would involve a third person if they are not able to resolve the issue. And the remaining 5 participants said they would ignore the person. Based on these results, it shows that the way people solve their issues is dependent on the situation. During the interview, 6 participants stated that they would talk to the person to try and resolve the issue if it is a close friend or a family member. However, if the person is just someone they work with, they would involve a third person to prevent the problem from aggravating and to also quickly resolve the issue. This shows that a third person does not always need to be involved for a conflict to be resolved. Moreover, 5 participants highlighted the fact that they are able to resolve the issue with the person because the person understands that there is an issue and is willing to

resolve the issue. This finding shows that people can resolve conflicts without the involvement of a third person if the other party is willing to resolve the conflict. This supports

Mohammed's (2015) point which states that one of the steps used in ADR is to ensure that the parties involved understand that there is an issue. With regards to educational institutes, one participant stated that if the issue is with a coworker, they would involve their boss as the third to help resolve the issue. The participant went on to say that it is a faster way to solve the issue to get back on track because having issues with a coworker can affect students especially if the she needs to work with the person to assist students.

For intrapersonal conflict, all the participants stated that they would involve a third party. This shows that people normally like to talk to someone they trust to help them come up with a solution to resolve their issues. During the interview, one participant stated that the person they talk to will depend on the situation. For example, if it is about relationship issues, she would talk to her mom about it, if it is work related, she might talk to a colleague about it, and so on.

How does conflict outside the workplace influence your performance at the workplace?

This question was asked to determine the extent to which conflict can influence the performance of the participants at the workplace. 20 participants stated that conflict outside the workplace would not affect them because they try to separate their personal lives from their working life. Only 2 participants stated that it would influence them if the person is significant to them. Thus, a family member or close friend. These results show that people try to separate their personal lives from their working life; although it is not easy to do so but they try their best. And this can be seen with the case of the two participants that stated that conflict affects them if it involves someone significant to them.

During the interview, one of the participants gave an example of a situation using his children. The participant stated that if his child is sick or his child's school call him because there is an issue, it would affect how he performs at the workplace because his mind would not be at peace due to the wellbeing of his child. The participant also stated that in this situation, he would ask for a leave to attend to his child because he would not be able to assist students with their academic work, which would affect the students greatly. This means that conflict outside the workplace can influence a person's performance at the workplace because it is not everyone that can entirely separate their personal lives from their working lives. And in an educational institution, the students will suffer because they are not able to get the full attention that is required from their academic advisor.

How does conflict with coworkers affect your performance at the workplace?

When participants were asked this question, 14 participants stated that it would affect their performance if they have to work directly with the person, while the remaining 8 participants stated that they would not focus on the conflict even if they are working directly with the person because they know it can affect their performance. The results show that conflict with a coworker can affect the performance of a person at the workplace. According to one participant, working directly with the person makes them very anxious and begins to think a lot. 4 participants stated that they almost quit their jobs because they had to work directly with the person, which made them very unhappy. Four participants highlighted on the fact that quitting a job because you cannot work with someone is a good decision you can make for yourself because most of your day is spent at the workplace and so it is important that you are happy with where you work and who you work with or work for. With regards to the 8 participants that stated that it would not affect their performance, it shows that some people like to keep things professional and it is

easier when the person is not significant to them. One of the participants stated that it is normal to have a misunderstanding especially at a workplace. And it easier to ignore the person because they are just a colleague and nothing more so he does not see why he should let their actions affect how he functions at the workplace. The participant also stated that as a teaching assistant, if he lets the issue affect him, it would affect the way he relates with his students. This means that conflict can affect the performance of an employee in an educational institute which would also affect the students.

When you are working in a team, how do you deal with opinions and different personalities?

This question was asked to determine how people manage the different personalities and opinions they experience in a team. According to the results, 20 participants stated that they respect people's opinions and they try to tolerate people by understanding that we have different personalities. And 16 participants stated that they try to be good listeners and contribute when necessary. But during one of the interviews, a participant stated that they try to respect people and their opinions, but some people are always talking and do not give others the chance to contribute, and end up imposing their opinions on their teammates. This reveals the reason why as human beings we experience conflict all the time which is because we have different personalities and beliefs. This validates the point that employees would not get along from time to time due to differences in perspectives, miscommunication, values, personalities and experiences in life (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2006; Kudonoo, 2016).

Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with difficult teammates. And how did it affect the performance of the team?

In answering this question, 12 participants stated that they either tried to do the work appointed to the difficult teammates, or they ensured that everyone did their part. And the remaining 10

participants stated that they would ignore them because focusing on them will slow them down. The results reveal that some people prefer to ignore people that do not add value to whatever they are doing. In the earlier responses of participants to prior interview questions, some of the participants stated that they would just ignore the person. This could mean that people find this as an easier solution especially if ignoring the person does not affect them. One participant said, "Some people would just waste your time if you focus on them which can affect how your team performance. And in such situations, you would always have to give a report at the end, so if you are not useful there would be consequences." Therefore, all he must worry about is what he can do as an individual and how he can help the other teammates that are willing to do the work. This result provide evidence that how you solve an issue in a team will determine how your team performs. For example, focusing on the difficult teammate will slow the team down, but focusing on the work when there is even conflict can cause a team to produce good results. This supports the example that if lecturers and teaching assistants are not able to work in harmony, they would not be able to provide the students with the adequate knowledge and skills they need.

How did you handle a disagreement you had with your boss?

This question was deliberately asked to find out whether participants would approach a conflict differently because it is with their boss. According to the results, 19 participants stated that the conflicts they have had with their boss was due to a misunderstanding caused by lack of communication. And 3 participants stated that some of their bosses mistreated them for no reason giving the impression that they were just authoritative or they did not like them. One participant stated that when he had a different job in the college, he had a boss that did not like him and he did not understand why that was the case. But it was as though she hated him so much that she one time, embarrassed him in front of the students. So, it got to a point where he had to hide from

her to avoid any embarrassments and this greatly affected his relationships with the students because he was not able to assist them as his job required of him. Another participant stated that her boss is just unnecessarily strict and she believes that it is a common trait of most people in higher positions, so, she just ignores the ill treatment and does what she has to do. This supports Ghaffar's (2009) point that school principals or heads of departments use the authoritative approach like pressurizing lecturers to complete specific tasks which can bring about conflict.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the results, it is evident that conflict arises in educational institutions and can affect the performance of employees depending on how they decide to manage the conflict. And if they do not resolve the conflict, it can affect the performance of the students especially if they have to work directly with the students. Employees need to be comfortable at their workplaces in order to produce good results for the institution they work for. With regards to educational institutions, even though the study was focused on the employees, the recommendations are for the employers. Because as stated earlier, the outcome of this research may provide ideas educational institutions can leverage on to focus on conflict, its causes and effective resolutions for improved productivity and growth. Employers must ensure that there is effective communication at the workplace, including the fact that employees need to know and understand what the role of their job is. Superiors, especially the immediate bosses should ensure that they are not unnecessarily strict because it makes them unapproachable and in effect, prevents employees from voicing out their issues. Employers or immediate bosses should also ensure that everyone is treated fairly because employees need a safe environment to work well, and not have to come to work always

unhappy because they know they are going to have a bad day. Lastly, employers should provide

a formal complaint process that employees can use to resolve any issues they have.

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