Causes and management of school related conflict

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the causes and management of school related conflict. The review of relevant literature shows that conflict is an essential and unavoidable human phenomenon because where there is human interaction, there is a likelihood of personal likes and dislikes. These agreements and disagreements among individuals and groups in the school sometimes lead to conflict. Conflicts are neither constructive nor disruptive but the ways these are handled in the school make them either positive or negative. Causes of conflict include difference in perceptions, limited resources, overlapping authority amongst others; while conflict management strategies include accommodation, avoidance, competition and collaboration. Based on this discussion, the paper suggests that there should be regular staff meetings, good communication network and the teachers' and students' code of conduct should be made available to all staff and students so as to know their limit and avoid conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, school, management.

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a common occurrence in organisations. It is an inevitable part of organisational life because the goals of different stakeholders are often incompatible. The level of conflict present in the school has important implications for the schools' overall performance. When there is little or no conflict, organisational performance suffers. Lack of conflict in an organisation often signals that managers emphasize conformity at the expense of new ideas, are resistant to change and strive for agreement rather than effective decision making (Jones, 2000). When conflict increases from a low level to a very high level it escalate, organisational performance suffers. When an organisation has a dysfunctionally high level of conflict, administrators are likely to waste organisational resources to achieve their own ends, to be more concerned about winning political battles than about doing what will lead to a competitive advantage for their organisation, and to try to get even with their opponents rather than make good decisions. When an organisation has an optimum level of conflict, organisational effectiveness is likely to increase. Administrators are likely to be open to encourage a variety of perspective, look for ways to improve organisational functioning effectiveness and view debates and disagreements as a necessary ingredient for effective decision making (Mullins, 2010). Conflicts at present continue to be a factor in academic life. Schools frequently appear to be centres of tension on occasion. The term conflict is viewed in a variety of ways because of its confusion with those conditions which lead to situations of different conflict (Okotoni, 2002).

According to Denisi and Griffin (2005), conflict is a process resulting in the perceptions of two parties that are working in opposition to each other in ways that result in feelings of discomfort and/or animosity. Conflict is a process not a singular event. It evolves over time and draws upon previous events. While it may emerge as a result of a specific event, more than likely, it has been brewing for sometime. Parties involved in conflict may be individuals, groups and/or organisation. In the light of the above, this paper highlights the types of conflict, causes of conflict as well as recommendations for effective management of possible conflict situations in schools.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS

There are many potential causes of conflict in the school.

Mullius (2010) enumerated the causes of conflict as follows:

Limited resources

Most school resources are limited and as a result, teachers and principals struggle to have their own share. The greater the limitation of resources than usually, the greater the potential for conflict.

Poor communication network

Poor communication network is highly rated as one of the main causes of conflict in schools (Iwuagwu, 2011). School principals who introduce innovation without first educating the teachers and students of the nature and foreseen benefits of the innovation in the school cannot expect genuine cooperation and participation from them. And this can lead to conflict. Also, when decisions are not disseminated effectively, sources of conflict can this be created for or by teachers and students.

Task inter-dependence

Where the task of a teacher is dependent upon the work of another teacher, there is potential for conflict. Also if the work of a department in the school is dependent upon the output of another department, a similar situation could arise. If reward or punishment systems are perceived to be based on keeping up with performance level, then the potential for conflict is even greater.

Overlapping authority

When two or more teachers or departments claim authority for the same activities or tasks, conflict is likely to occur.

Role conflict

A role is the expected pattern of behaviour associated with members occupying a particular position within the structure of the school. In practice, the manner in which some teachers actually behave may not be consistent with their expected pattern of behaviour. Problems of role incompatibility and role ambiguity arise from inadequate or inappropriate role definition in the school system and can be a significant cause of conflict.

Inequitable treatment

A teacher's perception of unjust treatment in the operating of personnel policies and practices or in reward and punishment systems can lead to tension and conflict.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Inter-personal conflict

According to George and Jones (2006), inter-personal conflict is conflict between individual members of an organisation occurring because of differences in their goals and values. In the school system, inter-personal conflict occurs between teacher versus teacher and students versus students. A frequent cause of inter-personal conflict in the school system is personality clash. When two teachers distrust each other's motives, dislike one another or for some other reason cannot get along.

Intra-group conflict

Intra-group conflict is conflict that arises within a group, team or department (Griffin and Moorhead, 2007).

Inter-organisational conflict

Conflict that arises between one organisation and another is called inter-organisational conflict. In the school system, this can be conflict between the school and the environment, between this school and some other governmental bodies in the community.

MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT

Though it is not possible to have a conflict free school environment due to individual differences and interest, yet, when not managed, it could lead to chaos and anarchy, hence, the need to nip it in the bud.

The following steps should be followed to manage conflicts:

Step I

According to Dunham (2005), the first step in managing conflict is to analyse the nature and type of conflict. Here, questions may be asked and answers may come from the administrator's experience, partners, teachers, etc.

Step II

Once the administrator has a general understanding of the conflict, selection of the most appropriate response to the conflict is made. Griffin and Moorhead (2007)

suggests five ways which are: Accommodation, avoidance, competition, collaboration, and compromise.

Accommodation: Accommodation occurs when the goals are compatible, but the interactions are not considered important to overall goal attainment. The difficulty with the habitual use of the accommodating approach is that it emphasizes preserving a friendly relationship at the expense of appraising issues critically and protesting personal rights.

Avoidance: When conflicts are handled by avoidance, the two parties to a conflict try to ignore the problem and do nothing to resolve the disagreement. Avoidance is often ineffective since the real source of the disagreement has not been addressed. Conflict is likely to continue and communication and cooperation are hindered.

Competition: This occurs when each party to a conflict tries to maximise its own gain and has little interest in understanding the other party's position and arriving at a solution that will allow both parties to achieve their goals. It is an attempt to satisfy one's own needs at the expense of the other person's. This can be done by using formal authority, physical threats or by simply ignoring the claims of the other party. The problem with the repeated use of this approach is that it breeds hostility and resentment.

Collaboration: This is a way of handling conflict in which the parties to a conflict try to satisfy their goals without making concessions and instead, come up with a way to resolve their differences that leave them both better off. It attempts to fully address the concerns of both parties. The intent is to find solutions to the cause of the conflict that are satisfactory to both parties rather to find fault or assign blame. Although this approach is not appropriate for all situations, when it is used appropriately it has the most beneficial effect on the parties involved.

Compromise: This takes place when each party is concerned about not only its own goal accomplishment but also the goal accomplishment of the other party and is willing to engage in a give and take exchange and make concessions until a reasonable resolution of the conflict is reached.

Step III

Pre-negotiation

According to Dunham (2005), to set the stage for effective negotiation, the groundwork must be laid. There must be initiation; the school head raises the possibility of negotiation and begins the process. Conditions must be right for negotiation to be successful. Meeting logistics must be established.

Step IV

Negotiation

When negotiating, the school head should be sure to openly discuss interest unclear rather than stated positions. To manage conflict, he or she should concentrate on inventing options for satisfying interest. The school head should not judge ideas or favour any of the options. Only after the partners have finished listing options should the options be discussed. And at the end, every partner must be confident that the others will carry out their part of the agreement (Dunham, 2005).

Step V

Post negotiation

Once negotiation is complete, the group will need to implement the decisions made.

CONCLUSION

Although conflict is often considered harmful and something to avoid, it can also have some benefits. A total absence of conflict can lead to apathy and lethargy. A moderate degree of functional conflict on the other hand can stimulate new ideas, promote healthy competition and energise behaviour. Although a certain amount of organisational conflict may be seen as inevitable, there are a number of ways in which management of schools can attempt to avoid the harmful effects of conflict. The strategies adopted will vary according to the nature and cause of conflict outlined above. It is noted here that managing conflict takes time and effort but attempting to establish a climate of mutual trust, consideration and respect is worthwhile.

Since conflict is seemingly unavoidable particularly in a school setting, it is obviously necessary for administrators to be able to recognise conflict to view its constructive as well as destructive potential, to learn how to manage conflict. Even if conflict was taught to be undesirable, it would not be possible to create management free from it. Conflict could occur in any administrative set up, but the degree and frequency of the occurrence can create an unpleasant atmosphere leading to low job satisfaction and poor productivity.

RECOMMENDATION

Conflict can be both harmful and valuable; it should be

managed in such a way that it brings more gains than harms to schools. One best way to achieve this is by bringing the people affected or involved in the conflict into a dialogue where each will be accorded a fair chance to express their point of view.

The school head as conflict mediator should play the role of a judge by ensuring that rationality and objectivity reign in the dialogue so that the warring parties reach a consensus on the issue of concerns. Conflict in schools becomes harmful if the groups are allowed to dwell on personalities or on what divided them rather than on issues and facts.

The staff meeting is one of the most valuable institutions for ensuring the better running of the school. Apart from being a forum where members of staff exchange ideas, it is also a place where the spirit of oneness should be developed and where the views of all can be properly oriented to the ideas which the school is meant to uphold. In staff meetings, teachers' differences that can result in conflict are brought to the open and discussed in order to find solution to the conflict.

There should be good communication network vertically and horizontally in the school system. The school administrator should create an atmosphere for effective communication. Clear and precise words should be used; proper channels that are most appropriate should be selected to convey messages in order to avoid misinformation and misunderstanding which can lead to conflict.

Teachers and students should be educated and enlightened on their code of conduct. This will help each party to understand their limits in order to avoid conflict. The school head should engage the school in organising suitable social activities and extracurricular programmes and parents and members of the community should be invited. The school could also help the community in the organisation of cultural activities, adult education programmes, etc. This can help to address any existing differences which can lead to conflict.

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