CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Organizations to Greene et al (1985:7) are "social entities that structure their activities to pursue desired goals". By working together several people could achieve mutually shared goals that were impossible to accomplish alone. Ideally, these interpersonal relationships should be productive, cooperative in nature and satisfying to all. In reality however, organizational managers find that they are not always the way they envisioned.

Almost every working relationship will produce some degree of conflict and organizational politics over time. Some conflicts and organizational politics are destructive while others are constructive depending on the behavior of the people in the organization. Usually, conflict arises in an organization because of disagreements over the goals to accomplish or the methods to be used in accomplishing these goals. Organizational managers find it difficult to resolve conflict but they must find a way to deal with conflict. Finding a way to "deal" with conflict entails conflict management.

The objective of this paper is to examine the fundamental causes of conflicts and politics in organizations, exploring alternative approaches to conflict and determining the problems associated with organizational politics with a view of proffering solutions. To achieve this objective, basic conceptual issues relating to conflict management and organizational politics are discussed.

Since conflict is to a large extent, inevitable, and is an everyday occurrence in life, organizations need to consider ways of managing it. But in doing so, managers must ensure that conflict and organizational politics do not become ends in themselves, but rather those conflict situations and political issues that are counterproductive and disruptive to organizational goals are resolved.

Basic Conceptual Issues

Donnelly et al (1995:363) observe that:

Conflict results when there are incompatible goals, cognitions, or emotions within or between individuals or groups that lead to opposition or antagonistic interaction.

According to McShane and Glinow (2000:402), conflict "is a process in which one
party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. Conflict is a perception. Perception to Hodgetts and Altman (1979:302) is a person's view of reality. This view which is determined by values, beliefs, and past experiences are influenced by the way people see things. Whenever someone believes or feels that another or group might obstruct his/her efforts a conflict begins. It might be a mild disagreement between two people regarding the best choice in a decision or it may be the foundation of an all-out war between two nations.

Perception generally generates feelings of conflict toward the other party. When conflict is task-related, the parties view the conflict experiences as something separate from them. They regard it as an object "out there" that must be addressed. This type of conflict is potentially healthy and valuable because it makes people rethink their perspectives of reality. Once conflicts are focused on issues, new ideas may emerge and the conflicts become controllable. Instead of focusing on issues, some conflict becomes personal. Each person/party sees the other person or party as the problem in the organization. This is the socio-emotional dimension of conflict.

In socio-emotional conflict, individual differences are viewed as personal attacks rather than attempts to resolve an issue. Discussions become emotionally charged, perceptional biases are introduced and information processing is impeded.

Interpersonal conflict among members always is present to some degree. Differences in opinions, attitudes, values and beliefs may create tension. Individuals tend to like people with values, beliefs and opinions similar to their own. This is the "personality clash syndrome" which happens not only between superiors and subordinates but also among members of groups. In organizations, individuals who are in a state of conflict with other members are also likely to be dissatisfied with the interpersonal features of the group.

Managers must also manage inter-group conflict. It is the wish of every manager to see that groups cooperate and work toward the accomplishment of organizational and individual goals. Conflicts do develop among groups if the groups are working on tasks that are interdependent, the coordination and effectiveness of working together become crucial managerial issues. The relationships can become antagonistic and may disrupt the entire flow of production.

Courses of inter-group conflict
There are a number of determinants of inter group conflict. Likert (1961:247) outlined some of the more important ones that relate to limited resources, communication problems, differences in interest and goals, different perception and attitudes, and lack of clarity about responsibilities.

Limited Resources
In the Nigerian context, groups that possess an abundance of materials, money,
and time are usually effective, when a number of groups are competing for limited resources, there is a good chance that conflict will result. The competition for the equipment, main merit increase in terms of money or new position may become a determinant of conflict.

Communication problems

Generally, groups are expected to be very involved with their own areas of responsibility. Paying attention to worthy endeavor may result in communication problems. The receiver of information must be considered when a group communicates an idea, proposal or decision. Stanton (1983:31) believes that "receiving a message is not the same as understanding it because you (the receiver) has to make sense of the stimuli, interpret it or decode it". Lack of communication and misunderstanding is a source of conflict.

Different interest and goals

Once a group is ignored it becomes hostile because it is ignored. For example, group A workers in a bank may want management to pay their overtime allowances, while group B workers may want management to improve in company pension plans. Both groups have different interests and goals. If management believes and addresses the pension plan issue, group 'A' in that organization may become hostile thereby bringing about conflict.

Different perception and attitudes

As stated earlier, conflict is a matter of perception. Individuals perceive differently. The groups to which they belong also can have different perceptions. Groups tend to evaluate in terms of their backgrounds, norms, and experiences. Since each of this can differ, there is likely to be conflicts among groups. For example, some groups tend to overvalue their own worth and position and undervalue the worth and position of other groups. When this happens, there is bound to be a conflict.

Lack of clarity of the job

Job clarity, Donnelly et al (1995:364) "involves knowing what others expect in terms of task accomplishment". In many cases, it is difficult to specify who is responsible for a certain task. Most organizations in Nigeria experience this difficulty. Certain responsibilities are not clearly stated in some organizations. For example, is it the marketing, advertising or research and development department that is responsible for the increased interest in the product line? The inability to pinpoint positive and negative contributions can cause groups to compete for control over those activities that are recognized thereby bringing about conflict.
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Ambiguity
This is a determinant of conflict because the uncertainty caused by ambiguity in tasks increases the risk that one party intends to interfere with the other party’s goals. It also encourages politics in the organization.

Strategies for Managing Conflict

McShane and Glinow (2000:412) just like Donnelly et al (1995:365) have put forward a number of structural approaches to conflict management. Some of the strategies include:

- **Emphasizing super-ordinate goals**: These are common objectives held by conflicting parties that are more important than the departmental or individual goals on which a conflict is based. For example, an organization may keep the employee focused on the goal of serving its customers instead of focusing on individual goals. Super-ordinate goals offset the problem of differentiation because they establish a common frame of reference which in most cases are mutually agreed upon. According to Eisenhardt (1997:77) this strategy is effective in decision making as groups frame their decision as “collaborations” thereby drawing attention and commitment away from sub level goals. This strategy also minimizes socio-emotional conflict.

- **Reducing differentiation**: Differentiation refers to the diversity individuals bring to work places and in their relationship. To remove differentiation, individuals must alter or remove the conditions that create these differences in the first place. If individuals in a company, say, Benue Brewery Ltd, Makurdi are made to wear the same work clothes, then differentiation would be reduced. This strategy helps in reducing the “us” versus “them” differences that exist in more hierarchical organizations. In technologically advanced nations like Japan, organizations try to encourage and reinforce a generalist rather than specialist career orientation. Moving or transferring employees around different jobs, teams, departments, states, and countries so that they develop common experiences with their senior decision makers removes differentiation.

- **Improving communication and understanding**: Buore and Kurtz (1994:5) refer to communication as a “meaningful exchange of information through messages”. Effective communication i.e. effective writing, speaking, and listening skills – affect every aspect of business in Nigeria. Communication is critical to effective conflict management. The receiver of information must be considered when a group communicates an idea proposal or decision. Misinformed receivers are likely to become irritated and hostile. When a manager improves the opportunity, ability and innovation to share information, the parties develop less extreme perceptions of each other than if they rely on stereotypes and emotions.

Direct communication provides a better understanding of the other party’s work environment and resource limitations. Most companies have introduced
dialogue meetings. A dialogue to Isaacs (1993:24) is “a process of conversation among team members in which they learn about each other’s mental models and assumptions, and eventually form a common model for thinking within the team”. Inter-group mirroring is also very important especially in situations where relations between two or more work teams or departments are openly hostile. Inter-group mirroring is a structured conflict management intervention in which the parties discuss their perceptions of each other and look for ways to improve their relationship by correcting misperceptions. It may take a form of retreat where both sides share their images of themselves and each other so that distortions and misunderstandings are revealed and ultimately corrected. Inter-group mirroring is a process which begins with parties identifying and prioritizing their relationship problems and finally establishing goals and action plans to correct their perceptual distortions and establish more favourable relationships in the future.

Increasing resources: A basic way to reduce conflict due to resource scarcity is to increase the amount of resources available. According to Lipsey (1979:53), “most of the problems of economies arise out of the necessity of using scarce resources to satisfy human wants”. It is true that resources are scarce and there are a lot of competing interests in these resources. Wright and Noe (1995:18) identify these as physical resources, organizational resources, and human resources. Effective management of these resources requires that managers must understand the ways people behave within the organizations.

Clarifying rules and procedures: Some conflicts arise from ambiguous decision rules regarding the allocation of scarce resources. These conflicts can be minimized by establishing rules and procedures. A rule, to Hellriegel et al (1999:45) “is a formal guideline for the behaviour of employees while they are on the job”, while a procedure “is a chronological way (steps) in doing things”. Pfeffer et al (1998:13) observed that “if you make it clear upfront, it minimizes misunderstanding and leads to a good working environment”. One way to clarify rules is to establish a schedule for sharing scarce resources. For example, if two departments in a company are fighting over the use of a conference hall, a schedule might be established that allocates the hall exclusively to each department at a certain time in the week or month. Job clarity which involves knowing what others expect in terms of task accomplishment is also important in this aspect.

Reducing task interdependence: Yet another way to minimize conflict is to reduce the level of interdependence between the parties. A shared resource could be divided so that each party in the conflict has exclusive use of part of it. In the alternative buffers might be introduced between people. There are buffers in form of resources or people who intervene between highly interdependence people or work units.

Domination: -Donnelly et al (1995:365) advocates domination as a strategy for conflict management. Domination requires the exercise of authority and requires that the problem or conflict be resolved by a specific date. The believe is that if
management uses authority, the groups may unite and resist the domination. In this case, management is regarded as a common enemy and individuals or group forget their differences in order to deal with their new opponent – management.

Removal of key figures: Another direct approach to conflict management is to remove the key figures (i.e. persons) in the conflict. If Mr. ‘A’ and Mr. ‘B’ are in differences, removing them may be a possible alternative. But this strategy is not always good because the figures to be removed may be highly respected leaders of the groups, or might have personal animosities and are only using groups to settle their differences or whether their removal would not create martyrs in the organization.

Organizational Politics

The question which is often asked is “why should Nigerian managers understand politics when the idea of behaving politically is one that they do not readily accept for themselves?” The word “politics” is often associated with national, state and local governments and not with companies and other businesses. It is generally believed that in politics, politicians try to “create image without reality”. But business and management is real - accomplishing results effectively and efficiently. An organization is structured in such a way that depicts a map of working relationships that are official and in the main device for distributing “power” among organization members. This is the resource power. To know how this resource power is distributed, managers must get involved in organizational politics.

Secondly, another factor governing political activity of managers in organizations is the degree of their dependency on others. Managers in dependent positions spend more time in building relationships with colleagues and thinking about breakdown in communication and understanding. It is through organizational politics that these dependencies could be better appreciated a good strategy for conflict management.

Organizational Politics defined

Organizational politics, as defined by Pfeffer (1981:7) of Torrington and Weightman (1994:318):

> Involves those activities undertaken within an organization to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources, to obtain one’s preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices.

Newstrom and Davis (1991:406) refer to organizational politics as “behaviour that enhance or protect a person’s self-interest”. These behaviours may be used to help attain a promotion, sell to management the merits of a proposal that will
expand one's responsibilities and resources or gain personal visibility. Employees involved in organizational politics put their self-interest above that of their employer in their attempts to gain and use political power.

Power, according to Miner (1973:299) is “the potential to exert influence”. It is the capacity of a person, team, or even organization, to influence others. Power, authority, and influence all relate to organizational politics. Authority is related to power that is inherent in the role prescriptions for a position within an organization. Influence, which is broadest in coverage, refers to any behaviour on part of one individual which alters the behaviour, attitudes, feelings, etc. of whatever means. One person may attempt to influence another by virtue of control over sanctions by persuasion, by playing upon attitudes held toward him/her, by exercising control over significant aspects of the other person's environment, or as a consequence of an exchange agreement which provides for influence as part of the bargain.

Power in organizations is derived from many sources. French and Raven (1959:150) have listed five sources of power within an organization. These are:

1. Legitimate power: Is an agreement among organizational members that people in certain roles can request specific behaviours of others. It is a perceived right which generally comes from the person’s position in the hierarchy, say, the manager, the director etc.

2. Reward power: This is derived from the person’s ability to control the allocation of rewards valued by others and to remove negative sanctions. These rewards include pay, promotion, time off, vacation etc.

3. Coercive power: Is the ability to apply punishment. This is done through the manager’s authority to reprimand, demote and dismiss employees. Legitimizes reward and coercive powers originate from the position.

4. Expert power: This is an individual's or works unit capacity to influence others by possessing knowledge or skills that they want. More expert power is expected in organizations especially now that Nigeria is moving from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy.

5. Referent power: It is the capacity to influence others by virtue of the admiration and identification they have on the power holder. People have referent power when others identify with them, like them or otherwise respect them. Both expert power and referent power come from within the person. It is largely a function of the person’s interpersonal skills and usually develops slowly over time. Power is therefore a property that exists in an organization or system; politics is the way in which power is put into action.

Techniques used to obtain organizational power

There are a number of techniques (tactics) that people use to gain and maintain organizational power. Some of the techniques are:

- Reciprocal support for the manager (head): This is known as "social exchange". It is argued that in Nigeria, it is better to be "pulled up" than to "push
Organizational power can be enhanced by having a powerful "head". The thinking is that "if you will do something for me, I will do something for you". This becomes a social "debt" which must be paid. Employees support managers with the view that manager will in turn "empower them". An employee must be in a position to pick among many managers who have the potentials (exposure) and the manager or patron will be in a position to see the patronized (visibility). This is the concept of "visiposure" which is prevalent in organizations. It is indeed the issue of "Godfatherism" in which the individual has to identify him/her self with a higher authority or a powerful figure in the organization. It is generally believed that one identifies oneself with a powerful figure, some of the powers "tricks off" on you. This identification gains a person special privileges in the organization.

An alliance or coalition: An alliance or coalition is an informal group that attempts to influence people outside the group by pooling the resources and power of its members. Individuals collaborate in their power search with those who have similar interests sufficiently similar for an alliance to be mutually beneficially. It is formed when two or more persons agree on common objectives that they cannot achieve alone such as getting support for something new. An alliance is a political technique because it pools the power of several people toward a common objective that each member is unable to influence alone.

Attacking or blaming others: The most direct and indirect form or organizational politics is to attack and blame others. This include giving rivals a bad image in the eyes of decision makers. People who blame or attack may inform their manager that the report is delayed because of Mr. A's inability to pass the report to them on time whereas in reality, they delayed the report.

Selective distribution of information: Information, they say, is a "political tool" as well as a source of power. People strategically manage the distribution of information (resource) to shape perceptions, limit the potential performance of rivals or further increase their power base. Information "politicizing" in organizations also involves hoarding information. In Nigeria today, political corporate environment means that "knowledge is power". Individual (or departments) are reluctant to share their knowledge sources (e.g., computer data or customer contacts) because they face the risk of giving up their power base.

Controlling information channels: Closely related to the above, some people can control the interactions among employees as well as the topics of those discussions. For example, an executive might discourage people in different location or departments from talking directly to each other because this might threaten the executive's power and job status. Or the agenda of meetings could be organized to suit the personal interests of the manager.

Cultivating networks: "Political networking" refers to cultivating social relationships with others to accomplish one's goals. By forming a network, people receive valuable information that increases their relevant and expert power in the organization. Networking is a normal part of the informal organization, but it creates
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barriers to those who are not actively connected to it. Some employees are not promoted because they are not connected to the “network”.

Doing favours: - Giving favours are another technique to gain organizational power. Managers select people (at service) to give their power to. Giving favours is a time-honoured way of ensuring the loyalty of subordinates who feel grateful to the superior who has been benevolent and who’s benevolent may be used again. On giving favour, Machiavelli (1981:44) warned:

Whoever is responsible for another becoming powerful ruins himself, because this power is brought into being either by ingenuity or by force, and both of these are suspect to the one who has become powerful.

Conditions for Organizational Politics

Certain conditions give rise to organizational politics. According to Murray (1980:237) some of the conditions are as follows:

Scarce resources: When company’s budgets are slashed, people rely on political techniques to safeguard their resources and maintain the status quo.

Credit for successful jobs: People also try to get credit for successful projects and avoid association with failures because they compete for rewards and other scarce resources. The only way they can get this credit is through organizational politics.

Resource allocation decision: When resource allocation decisions are based on ambiguous, complex or a complete lack of rules, a condition for organizational politics exists. This occurs because decision makers are given more discretion over resource allocation and potential recipients of these resources use political techniques to influence the factors that should be considered in the decision.

Tolerating organizational politics: Organizational politics exist when it becomes a common place and is tolerated and supported by the organization. Some executives may be role models of bad corporate politicians to people down the hierarchy. In Nigeria, companies do promote people who are politicians to high positions devoid of talents to run the company. If left unchecked, organizational politics can paralyze the organization as people focus on protecting themselves rather than fulfilling those roles.

The Control of Organizational Politics

The conditions that fuel organizational politics also give clues about how to control dysfunctional organizational political activities. Ferris et al (1996:233) considered the following strategies that should keep organizational politics in control:
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Managers should ensure that there is sufficient supply of critical resources. This will ensure that sufficient inventory and cash flow exist in many cases.

Where resources are necessary scarce, managers should introduce clear rules and regulations to specify the use of resources.

Managers should establish a free flow of information so that the organization is less dependent on a few people at the center of the communication wheel.

Effective organizational change management practices should be used especially communication and involvement. This will help to minimize uncertainty during changes process.

Teams and organizational norms should be restructured to reject political tactics that appear to interfere with the organization’s goals.

Management should select as far as possible, people who have a moderately strong socialized need for power and not ‘die-hard’ politicians to fill positions in the hierarchy.

Opportunities for open and candid dialogue should be provided by management to resolve conflicts between employees and departments.

Political tactics should be discouraged in organizations and employees should be involved in monitoring the workplace.

Conclusion

In closing this article, there is need to revert to the problem that was posed at the beginning: how can people working together achieve mutually shared goals devoid of conflict and organizational politics? Both conflict and organizational politics are good if it used to the benefit of all and are indeed an essential part of managerial effectiveness. Conflict management and political behaviour is required of every manager. Politics is a system requirement for the success of an organization.

Extremes of conflict and “politicising” are destructive as well as distasteful. Power, for example, is two-faced; it is essential to the process of social integration, yet it divides people and produces serious organizational conflicts. For an organization to work at all, there has to be a distribution of power within the structure to get things done without stress.

Many employees in Nigeria are virtually interested in their own career success, modern organization therefore serve as fertile places for politics to thrive. Ability and political skills are necessary in management of conflict and organizations. Interpersonal skills are therefore essential for leaders, both for their personal needs and for smoothing the path to employee performance for the benefit of the
organization and the society at large.

References