Conflict Resolution in Improving Management-Students Relations in Learning Institutions in Kenya

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Abstract

Rapid changes in university structure and mission present various conflicts that require effective management. This article evaluates the effectiveness of distributive bargaining, integrative bargaining, and interactive problem solving models of conflict resolution in facilitating positive change in management and student's expectancies and attitude.

Conflict has occurred across generations and centuries with one of the first recorded conflicts between the brothers Cain and Abel (Barclay & Wolff, 2011). According to Deutsch and Coleman (2000), conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings (Fisher et al., 2000). Conflict is an inevitable part of any relationship, and maneuvering through an interpersonal conflict is a skill every person must learn (Scott, 2008).

In as much as disputes are inevitable if not handled well, they can collapse an organization or an institution causing havocs which can be expressed in form of strikes and even death. On the other hand disputes can have positive outcomes such as stimulating creativity and interest and ideas generation if for instance students and management enter into dialogue and participation on pertinent issues. To reduce unhealthy outcomes out of disputes, various strategies both in house and use of third party mechanisms and interpersonal techniques can be applied. When these strategies are put into considerations cordial relations amongst parties is enhanced which results in good relations between them. As a result, organizations enjoy higher productivity, employees enjoy good working environment and students are able to achieve their dreams by being in conducive study environments and parents as well enjoy good returns of their money when students perform well towards achieving their desired goals.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Management-Student Relation, Institutions of Learning

Introduction

Conflicts occur when two or more people do not agree on an issue or course of action. It is unavoidable in the workplace consisting of a number of individuals all with their own and different personalities and it's often valuable in contributing to the formation of high-performing groups (Mc Namara, 2013). Not all conflict is bad. When conflict is properly managed, positive learning experiences may result as it increases the group willingness and ability to ask questions as well as challenging the status quo. Conflict involves situations in which differences are expressed by interdependent people in the process of achieving their needs and goals, and it arises when a difference between two or more people necessitate change in at least one person for their engagement to continue and develop (Ghaffar, 2009). According to Fisher et al., (2000), conflict is an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other via anger, manipulation, or aggression. The word conflict may raise negative connotations, particularly in a business setting but as much as most people have experienced conflict in an organization that generated dissension, led to a toxic environment in the workplace, or eventually led to that organization's demise (Barclay & Wolff, 2011), literature analysis shows that although conflicts seem to be estimated as a drawback, there are a number of advantages related to the process. Conflict fosters an awareness that problems exist. Discussing conflicting views can lead to better solutions and managing conflict is quicker and more efficient than letting conflicts fester. Moreover conflict challenges old assumptions leading to changes in outdated practices and processes as well as raising awareness of what is important to individuals (William & Joyce 1998).

According to Nouman, Khan, and Khan (2013), conflict is a very common part of social interaction and human life. It's basically understood incompatibility of actions or goals between two or more people (Myers, 2010). It's therefore inevitable to find people working in organizations without conflict and disharmony which is as a result of various factors like status struggles, communication barriers, incompatible personalities, inappropriate behavior of persons, conflicting goals or even role conflict.

Conflict management seeks to limit the negative aspects and increases the positive aspects of conflict by implementing certain strategies. It aims to enhance learning and group outcomes (Rahim, 2002). In this context, managers play a crucial role in identifying and managing workplace disputes at an early stage. To this end managers can be both the solution to and the cause of workplace disagreements. There are a few approaches to managing conflict and as long with it different instruments could be useful to help managers and teams gain awareness of their conflict management styles. Examples include the Disc assessment and Thomas -Kilmann conflict mode instrument and Rahim's model. The key to remember is that there is no one style that is appropriate to all situations but knowing which style to adopt appropriately in the conflict is key to managing the conflict well. The prevalence of strikes which results from conflicts unresolved in virtually most public universities in Kenya has motivated the purpose of this paper. This is for the purpose of giving relevant insights on how the conflicts could be minimized to increase good relations between management and students for the benefit of both parties.

Objective

The main objective of this article is to increase the knowledge on conflict resolution on improving management-student relations in institutions of learning.

Models Of Conflict Management

Rahim's Model Of Conflict Management

Rahim's model is based on five conflict handling approaches each of which identifies a predisposition about how interpersonal conflict can be managed. The strategies are derived from the positioning of an individual's preferences along the two general dimensions of concern for self and concern for others. Rahim's framework consists of five management approaches namely, dominating, avoiding ,obliging, compromising and integrating.

Dominating approach is relevant when conflict is as a result of one or both parties clearly is in violation of company policy, when the issue is very trivial, urgency of response is required, team members are assertive and when taking action may not go well with the team members despite the lack of expertise of team members. Issues to consider in such a strategy is by explaining rationale for such company to team member as follow up action. (Rahim, 2002).

The second approach is avoiding which is relevant to use when cooling off is helpful such as when all parties are very angry and when there are more important things on agenda. Thirdly obliging approach can be applied when it is possible that one is wrong and when it is important to maintain good relationship in exchange for a favor from the other party in future. This approach is not suitable for situations in which the other party is obliviously wrong/ unethical. (Rahim, 2002)

The fourth approach is compromising and it is best fitted when consensus cannot be reached, temporary solution is needed and long term goals and targets of both parties are not compatible. Using this approach too early without awareness of the situation may result in poor communication with all parties hence should be considered. The last approach according to Rahim is integrating which means getting everyone together to discuss the entire issue. This approach is best when the problem is complicated and multifaceted. Expertise and resources of different people is required to come up with creative solutions, availability of time is important and commitment from all members is required to move forward. Integrating may be the most popular style of conflict resolution but when used for trivial matters it may result in lowered morale due to staff feeling that they have to attend pointless meetings since the issue can be easily solved (Rahim, 2002).

Conflict In Australian Universities

Dispute or conflict in Australian universities cost millions of dollars each year that could be spent more fruitfully on core activities such as in research and teaching. It consumes resources, costs which involve litigation, attracted widespread publicity and damages the national and international reputation of Australian universities. These conflicts have also raised important issues of academic standards and academic freedom.

Conflict In Newcastle University

In 2002/03 Ian Firns was contracted by the University of Newcastle to teach fee paying MBA students at the university's Graduate School of Business in Malaysian. Mr Firns discovered that assignments had been plagiarized from websites. His recommendations that the students resubmit their work for a maximum mark of 50% was not followed and the students work was remarked and passed. Mr Firns was concerned that serious misconduct by students was not being dealt with appropriately (Australian 167.03). The matter was later referred to the NSW ombudsman. The matter was later referred to the NSW Ombudsman. A university investigation recommended remedial training on plagiarism. St James Ethics center to

conduct an independent inquiry into plagiarism at the university was commissioned and report delivered to the university in Dec 2000 and made public by St James Ethics Centre.
The university responded with reforms of its policies and practices concerning plagiarism (Newcastle University 2004). Mr Firns was not satisfied with the way the matter had been dealt with. He referred the matter to the independent commission against corruption where by then it was in hearing. This dispute was reported in the Australia, London, Malaysia as raising a general concern about standards in Australian Universities. The three disputes considered above reveal a clear need to improve dispute handling in institutions of learning to avoid detrimental effects.

Conflict In South African Universities

Many South African universities over the past few years have experienced increased levels of conflicts within and between the main categories of people within a university staff (Academic and general management). This has occurred in the context of increasing financial constraints, the domination of executive in decision making and the use of authoritarian methods in dealing with conflicts compared with the more collegial methods of the past. This is consistent with a worldwide trend for universities to become corporate in outlook and practice and less like a community of scholars.
Recent contribution to the understanding of these processes in South Africa include Johnson (2006). Among the few international studies which have examined the conflicts emanating from changed university management approaches are Dee et al., (2004) in the US There appears to be strong similarities between South African and other countries. This along with trends behind is a major source of conflict and influences the way in which conflict staff management and students is handled.

Conflicts In Kenyan Universities

Higher education in post-independence Kenya has been characterized by rapid expansion in terms of students enrollment and the number of institutions offering higher education (Oanda *et al .,* 2012).There is a sharp increase in the number of private universities which is attributed to the increasing demand for higher demand for higher education which had its root cause in the rapid growth of the population of students enrollment at both private and public universities. In a university set up, though a university is an academic enterprise, a lot of academic effectiveness rests on administrative support machinery hence the management competences of university manager determines to a great extent the severity of conflicts within the university irrespective of the origin of the conflict internal or external.
The prevalence of strikes which results from conflicts unresolved in virtually all public universities has persisted amidst radical policy adaptation as well as embracing and implementation of justifiably acceptable policy frameworks at institutional level. For example in 1995, the government established the higher education loans board(HELB) to address the critical issue of financing higher education especially for brighter students from poor background   (Nafukho 2004). At institutional level universities introduced the privately sponsored students programs (PSSP), (Kiboiy, 2013) to accommodate qualified students who failed to acquire government financial support for higher education. Despite these radical decisions among others at both government and institutional level the issue of student unrest in Kenya's higher education continues to puzzle policy makers and decision makers in government and at universities. Managers who have tendencies to authoritarian and

dogmatism are particularly conflict prone. Equally prone to conflicts according to Miner (1973) are those with low self-esteem and a disposition to distrust and suspicion.

In the last decade, rapid changes in the mission and structure of institutions of higher learning have been witnessed. In the Kenyan educational system, universities have expanded through establishment of satellite campuses, increased admission, double intakes, self-sponsored parallel programs and diversity embracing among others (Mokaya, Oyugi, Kigen, Gatumi, & Ireri, 2013). Some of the emergencies that arise as a result of unresolved conflicts include arson attacks, riots, violence which result in injury and loss of life and property. Violence against lecturers, other students and destruction of property both in learning institutions and surrounding communities has greatly increased in the past years Mokaya *et al.,* (2013).Statistics indicate that frequency and intensity and violence of strikes has steadily increased over years. For instance in between 1969-2000, 69 case of student strikes were recorded at all public universities. But in terms of radical policy adaptation at both national and institutional levels, one should expect a downward trend in unrests instead however the frequency and intensity of violence associated with strikes has increased at an alarming rate with several deaths having been reported (Kiboiy, 2013).

When such conflicts occur it is paramount for the warring parties to resolve their issue to stop the conflict in escalating to unpleasant results which has and is being evidenced in institutions of higher learning. Rossi (2003) establishes that there are specific methods and stages that need be followed to find a solution. First the involved parties need to decide to engage with a trained and unbiased mediator to develop talks for peace. Secondly both parties have to acknowledge that conflict is unhealthy and problematic for all participants and decide to listen to one another. Moreover there must be some kind of honest revaluation about the conflict and the past wrongs as well as having some kind of plan to include plans for reconciling universities in different countries, and reflect the common needs for the communities. Additionally participants in the conflict should be able to share individual views feelings and stories as well as learn to talk that he /she is conflicted within an effective manner (Rossi, 2003).

Major Findings

As per the foregoing discussion above conflicts are inevitable as they have been evidenced in Australian, South African, London, Malaysia, Newcastle and Kenyan institutions of higher learning and when they occur, they consume resources, costs which involve litigation, attract widespread publicity and damages the national and international reputation. This has occurred in the context of increase in financial constraints, the domination of executive in decision making and the use of authoritarian methods in dealing with conflicts compared with the more collegial methods of the past. This is consistent with a worldwide trend for universities to become corporate in outlook and practice and less like a community of scholars. These scenarios considered above reveal a clear need to improve dispute/ conflict handling in institutions of learning for improved relations between management-students in order to realize greater gains both for the management and the students at large.

The Place Of Conflict Resolution For Good Relations Between Students And Management In Institutions Of Learning

Employee relations is concerned with employee-employer relations in an organization. For smooth functioning of an enterprise harmonious relationship between employees and employer is absolutely essential. Therefore as much as people with different goals, attitudes,

personalities and roles work in the same organization, conflict and disharmony is one thing which is inevitable hence both employer and employees, student and management should be able to handle conflicts in order to achieve that harmonious relations   which if not handled or settled can collapse an organization or an institution, dysfunction its operations and lower productivity of the organization.

Limited resources has been cited as one of the factors that causes conflicts in institutions for example where students are not able to meet their financial obligations such as payment of school fees. This propels conflicts and to solve this problem and encourage harmonious relations which increases productivity and efficiency, both management and students together should explore ways to resolve these conflicts by use of changing situational factors such as increasing avenues for getting resources such as higher education loan more consistently for students. Other options include coming up with ways on how institutions of learning can be self -reliant by coming up with income generating projects which would increase income for institutions. This will minimize strains caused by limited resources. This has been made practical by one of the public universities in Kenya; Kenyatta University which has built a mega Unicity mall in the university which will generate extra income for the university hence solve problem of limited resources.

 Authoritarian rule should not apply in management of institutions instead encouraging students participation, dialogue and listening to issues that affect them would be of great help in managing conflicts in institutions and as a means to quelling conflicts in order to enhance students-management relations. In-house resolution such as collective bargaining, to reduce perceived inequalities, reorganizing reward systems for equity and fairness, redesigning tasks and roles for compatibility, redeploying staff, training and developing staff to make them be able to manage students effectively should also be employed to help solve conflicts in the same institutions. Employing interpersonal techniques should also be a strategy to reduce conflict and a way of improving student-management relations. The management should have interpersonal relations with students by trying to come closer to them so that they get to hear issues affecting them discussing and giving a solution to those pertinent issues. Other ways include use of third party conflict resolution such as arbitration, mediation and conciliations. When all these avenues are explored and used then cordial relations will be achieved in institutions of higher learning which can translate to higher productivity, reduction of disputes, reduction of disorderliness, increased smooth collective bargaining on the part of both students and management.

Conclusion

Conflict is inevitable in institutions of learning. This has been seen in various institutions discussed above but at whatever level conflicts can be minimized and handled if only the two parties get to listen and work smart to overcome the issues. It has been found that conflicts are caused by authoritarian rule, limited resources and lack of commitment by the parties to solve them amicably. Therefore it requires commitment on both parties to stand and decide that they must overcome the problem at whatever cost. Approaches such as the ones suggested by Rahim's model could be applied to help solve conflict depending on the context of the conflict because conflict has been found to cost institutions millions of dollars in litigations and damaging reputation as evidenced in Australian Universities. Thus this will bring a lasting solution for both parties; students and management hence conflicts arising will be resolved amicably.

Recommendations

This article recommends that both parties should look at possible costs and risks of continuing with the conflict and therefore should always keep reconciliation and resolution in mind as well as conveying supportiveness and positive regard to end the stalemate through commitment which would mutually benefit both parties. Some of the ways recommended in this study is that authoritarian rule should never be used to solve conflicts because this aggravates conflicts if students feel that their issues are not listened to. Instead participation, dialogue and listening to issues that affects students will make them feel valued and included hence minimize conflicts. Interpersonal relations with students is also recommended as key in coming down to the level of students. Rahim's model of dealing with conflicts and the approaches such as dominating, obliging, compromise, integrating as well as avoidance can be borrowed in solving conflicts depending on the context of the conflict. Through this the management will get to understand student issues and vice versa hence preventing conflicts spillover which can be detrimental to both parties. Other ways include use of third party conflict resolution such as arbitration, mediation and conciliations especially where the management and student have not been able to agree on issues conclusively Lastly this article recommends that institutions need to come up with income generating projects which can aid institutions increase resources hence reducing strains between the management and students for amicable good relations.

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