Conflict Management in Tertiary Educational Institutions in Zimbabwe: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT The modern university or large college is characterised by diversified internal and external constituencies which differ in terms of goals, values and strategies of having things done. This makes it an arena of power and conflict or an organised anarchy. This paper argues that conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in any university / college since it is the nature of universities to breed conflict. Admittedly conflict is often unpleasant but one should not overlook its creative potential. When conflict occurs, leaders in tertiary education have at their disposal a number of conflict management strategies to employ so as to restore normalcy to their institutions. Since no one particular strategy can claim to offer solutions to all conflict situations, this paper advocates the use of multiple strategies in conflict management. These include but are not limited to the win-lose, win-win and contingency approach to conflict management. However, in practice, managers in higher education tend to achieve more organizational effectiveness by blending elements of each strategy in conflict resolution depending on the circumstances surrounding each situation. This paper seeks to explore conflict management strategies as well as challenges that leaders in institutions of higher education face in trying to manage conflict.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, scholars have devoted considerable time and effort to the study of conflict. Consequently, much is now known about its aspects and dimensions. Nevertheless, many people are still very sentimental about conflict and find it difficult to accept conflict as a natural and inevitable condition in social life. As noted by Fisher (2000), the behavioural sciences particularly Sociology, have long treated conflict as a pathological phenomenon, as evidence of a sickness to be rooted out and cured. This, probably, largely explains why documented literature and research almost solely emphasises conflict resolution. To argue in this way, is not to suggest that increasing skills in conflict resolution is bad. Rather, it is to show that if resolution becomes the sole passion in all conflict situations, then much stands to be lost. In other words, an adequate study of conflict should incorporate the analysis of its beginning, its process and its functional outcomes and how we can turn it to our benefit.

This paper represents a preliminary attempt to apply a useful conceptual approach to the understanding of conflict in tertiary educational institutions (universities and colleges) in Zimbabwe. The purpose is more to provoke thought than to present definite solutions or prescriptions. At the very least, it is hoped that a conscious confrontation with ideas about conflict will assist those "Practitioners" faced with the phenomenon in adjusting to its inevitability.

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and have not been aligned or agreed about yet, including: within oneself when you are not living according to one's values; when values and perspectives are threatened; or discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfilment (Fisher 2000). Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a "form, storm, norm and perform" period. Getting the most out of diversity means often contradictory values, perspectives and opinions (McNamara 2007; Ramani and Zhimin 2010).

There are as many definitions of conflict as there are researchers in the field. However, two views of conflict are in vogue. The first School views conflict as disruptive, dissociative and unhealthy for organisations Members of this school advocate social integration and stability and urge organisations to avoid conflicts or to suppress or defuse them where they have already

occurred (Mayer 2001). The second school views conflict as an inevitable organisational and social phenomenon which could be rewarding and creative to the organisation if well understood and managed. This paper subscribes to the second view which seems to be more practical and realistic than the first one which appears to be based on fear and emotion. Although there is no consensus on a specific definition of conflict, there are general concurrences, however, that two things are essential to any conflict namely: the existence of divergent (or apparently divergent) views and the incompatibility of those views. To this end, Weaver (2003) cogently observes that conflict exists wherever there are divergent views, leading to incompatible activities. In universities and colleges, conflict usually arises when people or groups differ with respect to objectives, approaches, attitudes, interests and priorities.

The Classical View of Conflict

In Classical Management Theory, the existence of conflict is viewed as evidence of breakdown in the organisation; failure on the part of management to plan adequately or to exercise sufficient control (Aina 1987). Conflict is thus seen in especially negative light and as evidence of failure to develop appropriate norms. Traditional administrative theory has therefore, been strongly biased in favour of the ideal of a smooth–running organisation, characterised by harmony, unity, co-ordination, efficiency and order (Ramani and Zhimin 2010). According to McNamara (2007), many writers in the management field and behavioural scientists view conflict as a disease to be stamped out. Clearly, very few scholars openly acknowledge that conflict does have both good and bad aspects. Matlawe (1988) asserts that the concept conflict is viewed negatively by many people particularly those in leadership and management positions. Contributing to this debate, Fisher (1993) notes that classical theorists are afraid of conflict, disagreement, hostility, antagonism and enmity and as such, conflict is viewed as something to be avoided at any cost.

The Interactionist View of Conflict

The Interactionist perspective on conflict presents a sharp contrast to the Classical view. Central to the Interactionist philosophy is the argument that conflict is a necessary and integral component of the effective operation of any organisation. Interactionists believe that the absence of conflict in an organisation almost inevitably indicates stagnation. In this regards, Matlawe (1988) adds that conflict is an inevitable phenomenon that organisations (educational institutions, churches, factories, burial societies, football clubs and youth organisations) will at one time or another have to face. The pertinent issue here is that conflict should be viewed as a universal characteristic of all human associations. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine either simple or complex relationships which are not in part defined by the nature of the conflicts which test and vitalise the bonds that people form with each other.

The premise that has been (and continues to be) of interest to interactionist researchers and educators is that all organisations and institutions depend on or use people to achieve their existential purposes or goals. In the case of universities, attainment of goals and objectives is largely determined by the quality of interactions among students, lecturers, chairpersons, faculty deans, pro-vice chancellors and vice-chancellors. What makes conflict inevitable in such a situation is that stakeholders come to the university with various and conflicting views, goals, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices.

Fillipo and de Waals (2000) reinforce this view by observing that the different social-cultural milieu from which people come from make it difficult if not impossible to perceive reality in the same way. This is particularly so in large universities such as the University of Zimbabwe, the National University of Science and Technology, and Africa University where lecturers and students are recruited even across national, regional and international boundaries. Understandably, people in such universities bring with them extremely diverse educational/intellectual, religious, political and cultural experiences and orientations. It is, therefore, no overstatement to say that social life in tertiary educational institutions in Zimbabwe and the world over tends to be characterised by divergent views that lead to incompatible activities. This makes conflict endemic in any social organisation including tertiary educational establishments.

The fact that conflict is endemic in tertiary educational institutions implies that it may be useless to expend over precious energy trying to side-step it. Instead, the clarion call for every leader in tertiary education is to look for best ways of

using conflict to the advantage of his/her organisation. In Kirkwood's (2002) view, conflict in itself is neutral. That is to say, whether or not it will bring positive or negative results will depend, to a large extent, on how it is managed.

The Structural View of Conflict

It is often assumed that conflict results from irrational behaviour in individuals. This assumption leads to the conclusion that, if irrationality could be reduced then conflict would likewise diminish (Kikwood 2002). What is interesting in such explanations of conflict is that they fail to account for the social structural realities within which the individuals operate. Onsarigo (2007) argues that it is in the social structure of a given tertiary educational establishment that the genesis of conflict can be sought. The same author goes on to postulate that university structures, whether they exist formally or informally, serve as blueprints for control and hierarchy.

Universities and colleges as social systems comprise of many different kinds of people who inevitably disagree with each other on many dimensions thereby making conflict of various kinds inevitable. For instance, students may disagree with their lecturer on assessment criteria and allocation of marks assigned to work. Likewise, lecturers in the department may also disagree with the departmental chairperson or faculty dean on policy issues and their implementation. In the case of Zimbabwe, the constituents of colleges and universities and their diversities have been multiplying at a profound rate since the attainment of independence in 1980. In sociological terms, universities and colleges are far more heterogeneous now than they seem ever to have been. Roloff (1987) alludes to this view when he observes that the modern university is a public institution in which large numbers of students and staff from widely divergent subcultures are thrown together without very clear expectations of each other. The critical issue to note here is that the membership of a college and university changes so rapidly that it is a wholly different place every few years. Given such a scenario, it seems apparently clear that conflict should be accepted as a way of life in a university or college.

Roloff (1987) makes a cogent observation that the university and large college are fractured by expertness and not unified by it. The same author goes on to add that the sheer variety of experts supports the tendency for authority to defuse towards quasi-autonomous clusters. There is then a constant tugging and pushing over who should have the right to make certain decisions and over the basis upon which decisions should be made. For instance, while a faculty member may often do what he considers right, the dean as a bureaucrat will be restrained by what is authorised. Furthermore, university faculties the world over may be split many ways by their various professions and their various approaches to truth, reality and values. It is critical to point out that even within the same faculty; there could be multiple divisions beyond those of professions. Thus, one and the same university can have a diversified teaching force comprising cosmopolitans, locals, seniors, juniors, political activists and political apathetic. It is these and other distinctions that tend to bring university faculties in cleavages/ enclaves of varying potency and mass that subsequently give rise to conflict.

In a university set up, rules and procedures act as structural constraints that serves to reduce and manage conflict by clarifying such issues as who talk to whom, about what, when and who has what responsibility. For instance, at Masvingo State University, or any other university for that matter, there are rules and procedures as to who set exams, when, who moderates them, who produces the exam time-table, who publishes results, when how and so on. However, these rules can also cause or exacerbate conflict by becoming dysfunctional. This usually occurs when such rules lead to rigid, repetitious behaviour that does not readily allow for exception (the typical bureaucratic system). Mayer (2001) takes this point further by arguing more strongly that "...not infrequently, rules and procedures so complicate the processes of working out a relatively simple conflict through direct negotiation that they in fact create conflict." The crucial message that comes to the fore here is that all those involved in university governance should attempt to maintain fluid relationships in their institutions. For instance, there are times and places when hierarchical, formal relations should give way to less formal, more inclusive relations. Thus, in a university situation, decisions handled in normal circumstances by someone with bureaucratic authority (for example, chairperson or faculty dean), may be passed to a committee of broadly based membership (department lecturers) in order to avoid confrontation.

A notable structural factor influencing the incidence and nature of conflict in an organisation is the social norms of the organisation. As Fisher

(2000) observes, the creation of organisational climates that smooth over friction and frown upon open challenge and questioning makes it very difficult to identify and confront conflict at all. Similarly, when secretiveness and restricted communication represent the organizational norm, it is difficult to know if a latent conflict exists, let alone to plan ways of dealing with it (Weaver 2003). Many administrators of tertiary educational institutions (colleges, universities) understand this and make it a rule to put as little communication in writing as possible, to assemble people for meetings as infrequently as possible. When meetings must be held, some administrators make sure they control the proceedings tightly so as to minimise the "risk" of opening up issues that might "cause trouble".

From the preceding, it is clear that poor or inadequate communication network within a tertiary educational institution is directly conducive for the emergence of conflict. One manifestation of poor and or inadequate communication system in a university is the deployment of secret informers and spies in all university organs and operations by the incumbent leader(s). These informers and spies are usually charged with the responsibility of keeping a secret watch on the movements or affairs of others and clandestinely reporting these to the leader. Nevertheless, experience of working in tertiary education has shown that rather than reducing/preventing the much dreaded conflict, such clandestine and unorthodox structures tend to give rise to more conflict and animosity among university stakeholders. It is, therefore, instructive for leaders in tertiary educational institutions to be pragmatic, transparent, open and flexible in their operations so as to reduce the incidences of conflict.

THE OPEN SYSTEMS VIEW OF CONFLICT

This view is premised on the assumption that universities are open systems that are in constant interaction with their external environments. Implied in this view is the idea that much that goes on within universities and colleges reflect changes in their external environments. Musembi and Siele (2004) assert that universities and other institutions of higher education the world over, are being pressured to change; pressured not only by their internal constituencies (faculty and students), but also by their external publics, alumni, parents, fluctuating job markets and governments. Thus, due to changing public attitudes towards university education, universities are now expected to be responsive to the needs of the public they serve. This heightened expectation calls for a departure from a rigid and ivory tower posture of universities, to one that looks at universities with a human face. In the context of Zimbabwe, this expectation has been given a major boost by the democratisation of the Zimbabwean political process, as universities can no longer afford to remain somewhat aloof, insulating themselves from public demands or scrutiny if they are to remain credible and viable.

In his inaugural speech as National University of Science and Technology (NUST) Vice–Chancellor, Professor Lindela Ndlovu in 1996 made a pertinent observation that there is an increased expectation by the state and public that universities should solve real and contemporary problems in their societies (Zvobgo 1998). In the case of Zimbabwe, the State's prominent foothold/involvement in university governance derives from its critical role in the funding of university education particularly in state universities. This role is vividly exercisable through votes allocated to each university to cater for the erection of infrastructure, staff salaries and student grants. The involvement of the state in university affairs, while necessary, creates a fertile ground for the emergency of conflict. For instance, too much state involvement is always resented by both students and staff as it tends to threaten or curtail the autonomy and academic freedom of central administration, faculty and students. Indeed, academic freedom and autonomy are essential premiums highly valued by any university the world over. It is also unclear whether too much government involvement does not result in the "contamination" of university education thereby leading to its politicisation.

From the preceding, one can draw the conclusion that those who occupy leadership positions in tertiary education have to focus their attention on the institution-environment interface, plan and develop new, creative ways in which their institutions may respond to their environment. Whereas the institutions must change to function as open loop systems, they should however, strive to main-tain sufficient internal stability for faculties to conti-nue their teaching, research and scholarly activities.

APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

The choice of strategies and tactics for dealing with conflict presents a major challenge to managers of tertiary educational institutions. This is largely so because conflict takes many forms and arises out of the interaction of complex conditions. As a result, conflict is not manageable through the application of simple prescriptions. While this paper cannot serve as a comprehensive review of the range of conflict management devices, a few examples will be presented for illustrative purposes.

The Win–Lose Approach to Conflict

This approach is characterised by the fact that contesting parties see each other's interests as mutually exclusive. Under this model, one party marshals all its forces to compel the other party to do what the first has decided it wants. In Fillipo and de Waals's (2000) view, this model represents the efforts of each party -to win regardless of the consequences this may have for the other party.

In a university setting, win-lose approaches to conflict management largely find expression in the disputes occurring between a department chairperson and a lecturer, a lecturer and another lecturer as well as a student and another student and the attendant efforts to settle the disputes. Kriesberg (1998) observes that conflict situations of this nature are highly sentimental and characterised by accusations and counter accusations as conflicting parties try to defend themselves rather than listening to what is being said. In such conflict, members become highly impulsive in the way the conflict should be managed and hardly ever consider alternative resolution styles, since the thrust of each party is to prove its innocence and the guilty of the other. In Fisher' (1993) view, little is accomplished in a win-lose conflict management situation because communication gets constrained as those involved lose trust and acceptance of each other. In a conflict of this nature, members involved usually make absolute, often invalid and debilitating assumptions that are rarely subjected to constant revalidation. A case in point is a faculty dean who may remark as follows in a conflict: "*The lecturer should subscribe to my approach because it has always worked for the past ten years I have been faculty dean. After all the lecturer is still a probationer and has little experience of university education*"

The win- lose approach to conflict implies that no compromise is possible as each party feels the solution should be in its favour, and ignores the interests and goals of the other party. As Onsarigo (2007) observes, it is an approach that has clear winners and losers. Consequently, this method can be destructive to the personal and professional relationships of those involved since the conflict can just be superficially resolved. McNamara (2007) cites the following as the major limitations associated with win-lose solutions to conflict management: (a) its emphasis on victory implies that it is a closed approach that is fraught with bias and prejudice which prevent members involved from adopting possible alternatives to the conflict; and (b) it intensifies antagonism and hostility between the winning and losing group, a situation that creates long term dysfunctional behaviours that lead to a downward spiral of organisational health.

The Win–Win Approach to Conflict

As its name suggests, both parties to a conflict tend to benefit something (though not necessarily equally) because this strategy involves elements of bargaining and compromising. In Weaver's (2003) view, this strategy gives the parties involved in a conflict an opportunity to be subjects. Onsarigo (2007) alludes to this view by adding that it involves the process of collaboration, in which parties work together to define their problems and then engage in mutual problem-solving. The crux of the issue here is that parties participate in the search for a solution and where possible they are persuaded to see each other positively and to see each other's position as legitimate.

Fillipo and de Waals (2000) argue that in a win–win approach to conflict, each person should try to see the conflict through the other person's eyes, (commonly referred to as active listening). This is vital as it helps to foster trust and acceptance, qualities which are essential in conflict management. As Fillipo and de Waals (2000) cogently remark, "…if there is little trust between individuals, communication becomes ineffective because those involved are prepared to defend themselves rather than listening to what is being said". In the same vein Ramani and Zhimin (2010) postulate that the win–win strategy requires good communication skills and attitudes that support a climate of openness, trust and frankness in which to identify and work through problems.

Aina (1987) remarks that where the parties to a conflict do not possess the requisite communication skills, a facilitator can be brought in to help in the conflict management. For instance, a departmental chairperson can act as a facilitator in a conflict involving two students at a university. This is often referred to as the highest level of win–win conflict management because it leaves the groups with new skills and new understanding that they can use again and again in dealing with future problems (Kirkwood 2002). Deutsch and Coleman (2000) put it very well when he says that this approach is highly credible as it does not only result in organisational self-renewal, but it also develops a long term relationship between the conflicting parties.

The Contingency Approach to Conflict

Unlike the win–lose and the win-win approaches, which sort of prescribe a blueprint to conflict resolution, the contingency approach is non-prescriptive. The approach stems from the simple observation that no one particular strategy or approach can suit all types of conflict at all times. As Pang et al. (2007) accurately point out, "…it should not be assumed that one strategy is any more correct than the other or that any one approach represents the truth about conflict management." This makes it incumbent upon leaders in tertiary educational institutions to take into account the nature and circumstances surrounding a conflict when deciding how best to resolve it.

Musembi and Siele (2004) assert that conflict in universities takes many forms and arises out of the interaction of complex conditions. Consequently, conflict is not manageable through the application of simple prescriptions. This view has two crucial implications for leaders in tertiary educational institutions. Firstly, when conflict occurs, a careful diagnosis of the situation should be conducted as the basis for any corrective action to be taken. Secondly, it must be borne in mind that no decision can be better than the facts on which it is based. It stands to reason therefore, that in conflict management, effective diagnosis will bring to light the true causes of a conflict and this will ensure the choice of an appropriate strategy (Fisher 1993).

Leaders in tertiary educational institutions should learn to become less impulsive in the way they manage conflict and should always consider alternative resolution strategies. For instance, a central administrator at Midlands State University may have succeeded in 2004 in resolving faculty conflict by effecting changes in the organisational structure of the faculty. However, this same method may prove disastrous in the same faculty five years later because the context will have radically changed. Thus, instead of effecting structural changes to the faculty, this time the situation may be brought under equilibrium by striking compromise and bargaining among members.

CONCLUSION

Although conflict is as old as men, it is still dreaded and viewed negatively by many people particularly those in leadership positions. In this presentation, the modern university or college has been depicted as an arena of power and conflict due to its diverse constituencies. Given this scenario, conflict cannot just be wished away as it is in their very nature that tertiary organisations breed disagreements. Leaders in tertiary education are therefore expected to broaden their perspectives on conflict management since conflict that is not well managed can serve as the stimulus for further conflict.

The multi-perspectivist approach to conflict management in tertiary education has been depicted as one in which no one approach is presented as right or wrong in itself. Nevertheless, educational administrators are at liberty to make preferences or choices in favour either of eclecticism or of one perspective over others. It is partly because there is no general agreement as to how conflict should be managed that there is an ongoing theoretical debate in this area. The crucial issue is that when conflict occurs in an educational establishment, the manager/leader must not prescribe before proper diagnosing. This implies that he or she should not put the answer before the problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that university administrators and academics should seek to embrace open systems where everyone is let to air their views and the areas of conflict discussed openly.

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