



Education For Today

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THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PANACEA FOR HARMONY AND COOPERATION: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines current academic prescriptions of the causes of conflict in complex organizations and gives the panacea for homeostasis and stability. It opines that the study of organizational behaviour cannot be complete without an in-depth theoretical and critical analysis of conflict situations and how to settle them.

While conflict in organizations is inevitable, the place of the academic is to proffer solutions whenever they arise, by recognizing the conflict, defining it, considering alternative solutions, testing each for reliability and validity and selecting the best option.

The exposition concludes that homo sapiens in complex organizations should view the existence of conflicts as a necessary evil which serves as an indicator to the dynamism of establishments, hence we should learn to cope with various conflict situations and accept change instead of adopting evasive attitude, subterfuge and resignation.

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of the concept and ramifications of conflict has become a vital part of the study in organizational behaviour. The most obvious and relevant conflict is that between the human being-homo sapien-and the formal organization. Agyris (1968) opined that given the mature adult human being and the nature of the bureaucracy or formal organization, conflict is inevitable. This basic congruency thesis provides a great deal of insight into the study of organizational behavior, but it is not enough. Like many other concepts in Public Administration, conflict is very complex. Conflict can mean many different things to many different people and range in intensity from a minor difference of opinion to war between nations like the recent US-Iraqi war.

By studying group dynamics with special emphasis on the relationships of the individual to the group and of one group to another, Political Scientists provide a new dimension for the study of social conflict. The analysis of the nature of "the struggle between groups searching for the same or mutually exclusive goals, enlivens and enlightens the study of organizations, political parties and interest groups" (Rodee, C., Anderson, T., Christol, C. and Greene, T., 1976: 295).

Kelly (1974:565) notes that "conflict occurs when the group faces a novel problem or task; when new values are imported from the social environment into the group, or when members' extra-group roles are different from their intra-group roles." According to Self (1977: 87) "one of the most interesting of administrative phenomena is competition and conflict between departments or agencies. Competition arises from the demands of agencies for adequate resources and powers to pursue their goals successfully, or to enlarge their zones of jurisdiction". Yet, even though the above and many other examples show the inherent conflict or dichotomy found in groups, its presence does not necessarily mean a negative impact for organizational behaviour. People do not just fabricate conflict because of her dynamic nature.

The detection of conflict in any organization shows that the particular establishment is dynamic. This is because, as Coser (1956: 31) explains, "groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association, and conflicts within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. Group formation is the result of both types of processes far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is essential".

What should concern the administrator therefore is not in viewing the existence of conflict as an inevitable evil in organizations or societies but in trying to find solutions to conflicts when ever they arise. This can be done by recognizing the problem, defining it, considering alternative solutions, testing each for reliability and validity, and selecting the best option. Try to consider the consequences that would result from a particular decision, risk involved in adopting it and the ultimate value of each course of action.

In this paper, the focus is in the causes of conflict in organizations which include: policy conflicts, functional duplication, conflicts resulting from rival coalitions of agencies, competition between workers, that between line and staff, managers among themselves, the clash of values, a change of policy, political pluralism, demands of agencies for adequate resources and power to pursue their goals successfully or to enlarge their zones of jurisdiction, administrative conflicts between agencies which share power for the performance of the same service and that which exist between workers for

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posts within a firm. Lastly, some prescriptions would be provided for ensuring harmony and cooperation in organizations.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANISATIONS

Conflict is inevitable in all complex organizations because the actions and inactions of human beings are both complex and unpredictable. Hence the productivity of administrators is not measured through the number of queries they issue per year but by their ability to handle conflict situations maturely.

Conflicts Between Departments Or Agencies

According to Self (1977) "one of the most interesting administrative phenomena is competition and conflict between departments or agencies". To him, competition springs from the agencies' need for adequate resources and power for goal achievement. For instance, the conflict between the agencies and second person say the government is right before us here in Nigeria. The Medical Officers recently went on strike demanding for financial rewards thus initiating conflict between themselves as an association and the government.

Similarly, the police have been avoiding open confrontation with the government because they wanted to be armed so as to pursue their objectives successfully. (i.e. that of marching force to force in case they meet armed robbers). This is a potential source of conflict. Some agencies may like to enlarge their zones of jurisdiction so as to generate more income for the government but may not be permitted by law to do so. Yet, those permitted by law to collect this money may not be around. This happens say in a district office where the district officer in the absence of the Forest Guards may decide to collect "wood tax" from timber contractors. When these forest guards come to realize this, they may look at it as an encroachment into their area of authority and conflict may ensue.

Administrative dichotomy also arises frequently between agencies which share powers for the performance of some service. A good example here is say having the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) sharing the right to supply the entire public with electricity with a private firm. Cut-throat competition may set in and eventually conflict will evolve. The government agency NEPA may try to use her position as a government concern to send the private supplier out of business.

Anthony Dawns offered a territorial analogy of conflict between agencies. Each agency is viewed as occupying a policy zone which comprises

a heartland, an interior zone, a no man's land and periphery. Agency A's heartland is its exclusive zone of operation, but A's interior zone, though mainly under its control, may be a peripheral zone for other establishments. No – man's land is where agencies compete on roughly equal terms. This model assumes a degree of assertive action by agencies, and an absence or weakness of coordinative action, which may be quite untrue. This however offers a simplified version of "a phenomena which is considerably more complex." (Downs, 1967 : 17).

Political Pluralism

A pluralistic system is marked by the proliferation of separate agencies, both "horizontally" at the same level of government and "vertically" at regional and local levels. The authority of each agency is relatively greater than under a more unitary system. Political pluralism sees society as composed of competing groups and interests, and accepts or recommends that the administrative system should mirror these social demands. On a full pluralistic approach, one is bound to accept administrative duplication since the needs of clients overlap; and also administrative conflict since this parallels, at least to some extent the conflicts between social groups. On the contrary, the pluralist theory could be criticized for allowing administrative structures to be dominated by the demands of the more powerful groups.

Paternalism

Another source of conflict in organizations is the provision of a more paternalistic treatment of underprivileged groups, who are supposedly protected by the "public spirit" of both politicians and administrators, spurred on occasion by latent voting power. These ideas of administrative fairness and equity are not only a myth but they have to be set against the direct influence upon administration of well organized groups.

When administrators talk of catering for the "General Interest" of the masses, they are not only joking but they are being dishonest. In Africa as else where, the administrative class does only things which can best serve their own interest. For example, those in the rural areas hardly enjoy good roads, regular supply of clean water and electricity, yet, the politicians and administrators will always promise them. When their expectations cannot be met, they resort to a confrontational stand with the government sometimes by evading taxes and refusing taking part in voluntary work schemes.

Organisational Incompetence

The failure of any head office or control station to guarantee a sort of

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organizational autonomy will surely spark off conflict especially when the establishment is large and are located far from each other. This is a sure case for polycentricity which stresses the notion of goal effectiveness as defined particularly by those who are intended to benefit from it

Goal effectiveness will be maximized if the relevant agency is given as broad a mandate as possible to "get on with the job", and is trammled as little as possible by requirements for consultation. Officials become frustrated when they find that their primary goals are blocked by the need to consider irrelevant goals. This type of conflict has always forced administrators to call on the government to "cut-free of red tape" certain functions of government. On the other hand, some scholars claim that the effect of increasing agency autonomy will be to weaken general political control in favour of professional control or sectional influence, or some mixture of these elements. On the whole "the more self-contained is any function and the clearer is the policy guidance laid down by political leaders, the more practical it is to increase agency autonomy" (Self, 1977:91).

Clash of Values

Another cause of friction in organizations is the clash of values. On this point many countries have different views. In Britain, administrative competition and conflict are looked upon as something bad and any "failure of coordination" will provoke serious criticism of public administration. These attitudes are rooted in the historical background of the Britons who look at the crown as the agency responsible for the harmonization of public action. In the United States of America, conflict and competition in administrative circles is seen as the necessary price of a pluralistic system, or even praised as indications of administrative vitality or as analogues with economic competition between firms.

Struggle for Posts

In the firm also, there may be conflict resulting from the struggle for posts. However, organization theory is silent on the question of how much and what kind of competition is desirable between parts of the administrative system, or how this competition should be structured.

In what self (1977) calls "agency philosophy and independence" he holds that the potency of "agency philosophy" will vary considerably both between governmental systems and between agencies. Agency view points are more aggressively presented in USA than in Britain thus precipitating conflict. These differences between agencies depend partly on antiquity for example

the rigid policies of the British Treasury as we see them today, were laid down as far back as the 16th century.

Line and Staff Conflict

Conflict is also seen between bureaucrats and technocrats because while the work of the former is governed closely by laws and rules and is concerned with the enforcement of regulations or the provision of services, that of the latter, is concerned with more flexible services and tasks which require a good degree of professional or scientific discretion. Conflict will always arise because while the first type will adopt a generalized and legalistic view of its functions, the latter will lean towards more discretionary and particularistic interpretations of its objectives.

Government Versus Independent Corporation

Conflict will also spring up if the government has no altruistic policy towards her subjects. For instance, the subjects are bound to consider the government as not democratic enough if government monopolizes the management of mass communication. In case of western countries, there would be conflict in the society between the independent corporation which would have managed the corporation and the government. To avoid this conflict in Britain, the government placed the management of the mass communication under an independent corporation.

Administrative Conflicts

Administrative conflicts develop from the quest by certain or all civil servants to cripple a particular government they do not like. This in other words, is used as a reproach to the unity of the government of the day. Also when the government of the day fails to implement a vital public policy, this would arouse hostility among affected groups. Britain foresaw the conflict which would have arisen had she not in 1965 sought to implement part of its industrial policy via an industrial reorganization of Corporations and its land policy via a land commission instead of through ordinary departments. These devices at least reassured critics that the programmes would be guided by reputable business or professional men appointed to the boards of the new agencies.

Functional Duplication

In what Self (1977:99) calls "functional duplication and policy conflicts" he went further to state that no two agencies can perform exactly the same tasks hence the extent of functional duplication is a matter of judgment

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"duplication can be said to arise when two or more agencies provide very similar services for very similar publics, or pursue activities which substantially overlap in terms of their technical and professional requirements". For example, in 1969, the British Ministry of Technology was striving to modernize certain industries with the aid of recommendations from joint working groups, while the department of Economic Affairs was promoting the efficiency of the same industries through the initiative of industrial adviser and sponsored economic development council for the same project.

The American system, by contrast, provides extensive functional duplication. The rivalries of congress and president prevent effective policing of functional allocations other than intermittent and very limited efforts by the Bureau of the Budget, and lay the door open for the type of alliance between administrative agency, client group and congressional sub committee which defends the agency's sphere of influence.

Competition becomes direct conflict only in those cases where some task is indivisible but two agencies have the power and the will to do it. The prime example is the conflicts between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers in USA over the construction of high dams and hydroelectric works. Their interest started from opposite ends. The Bureau from land reclamation and irrigation, the corps from navigation and flood control. The conflict could not be resolved despite a presidential backing for "dominant interest" of the bureau in the proposed project because the congressional preference for the corps was equally strong.

Administrative sociology actually supports the political and constitutional causes of administrative fragmentation. The lack of professional administrators does much to explain the weakness of inter-agency committees. These unqualified administrative officers create barriers to mutual understanding and strong attachment to the procedures and philosophy of the office.

Policy Conflicts

Another cause of conflict we cannot ignore, is what is known as "Policy conflict." Although this is different from functional duplication, the two phenomenon overlap. Conflict here arises from disagreement between agencies over the desirable action to be taken on some matter of mutual concern. Conflict occur when there is an apparent or real frequent inconsistency or vagueness of public policy goals.

Among agencies, conflict arises when there is a blockade of the programme of one by another. Similarly, conflict also emanate from the use of resources. There is a struggle for society rewards or "resources" status,

prestige, income, power, influence and security. When there is uneven distribution of these resources, conflict sets in. Organizational resources represent inputs of money, staff and legal powers. The most obvious type of administrative competition is over budgeting.

The mere institutionalization of functions creates a tendency to conflict on all matters of common concern. The multiplication of governmental powers and the countervailing efforts at planning and coordination means that numerous decisions are of concern to more than one agency. Expression of conflicting view points is expected here.

Differences also occur over the results rather than the methods of administrative co-ordination. In the US, these are far from impressive. It seems to be a major achievement for an interdepartmental committee to standardize the procedure for two closely similar types of grant-in-aid. Any real attack upon the idiosyncrasy and complexity of agency methods for solving similar problems, is beyond the capacity of the machine.

Quest For Expansion Of Functions

Friction may also arise when an agency strives to expand its functions. This would invoke the hostility of any other agency whose functions would be reduced.

Luthan's Contribution

On the contrary, Luthans (1973) enumerated the following causes of conflict: intra-individual aspect resulting from frustration, goal conflict, role conflict or norms, role conflict in supervisors, role conflict as the lesser of two evils, interpersonal conflicts which springs from two more persons interacting together, the "Johari" window (developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Inham hence name Johari). In other words, conflict resulting from the idea of "you" and "me", organizational conflict, structural conflict which grows from incompatible goals situations, incompatible means and resource allocation, hierarchical, functional, line-staff and formal-informal conflicts.

While Luthan's (1973) causes of conflict are similar in part to those of Self (1977), Luthans seems to have made an indebt study of the causes of conflicts. For instance, he did not only give intra-individual aspects of conflict but went further to suggest ways of analyzing intra-individual forms of conflict by considering the frustration paradigm, goals and roles. He stated that frustration occurs when a motivated drive is blocked before reaching a desired goal. The barrier may be either overt or covert and this frustration normally triggers defense mechanisms which subsequently results to conflict.

Positive and Negative Goals

Another common source of conflict for an individual is a goal which has both positive and negative features or the existence of two or more competing goals, whereas in frustration, a single motive is blocked before the goal is reached, in goal conflict two or more motives block one another. For easy analysis, Luthans (1973: 388-89) identified three different types of goal conflicts: (a) "the Approach-approach conflict where the individual is motivated to approach two or more positive but mutually exclusive goals," (b) "the Approach-avoidance conflict where the individual is motivated to approach a goal and at the same time is motivated to avoid it," (c) "The avoidance-avoidance conflict where the individual is motivated to avoid two or more negative but mutually exclusive goals."

Role Conflict

Role is a position that has expectations evolving from established norms. Role conflict will result if a son wants to play the role of a father when not asked to do so or a University student trying to teach his lecturer. This role is also seen among supervisors. The first-line supervisor is often described as the "person in the middle." One set of expectations of this role is that the supervisor is part of the management team and should have the corresponding values and attitudes. A second set of expectations is that supervisors are a separate link between management and work force and should have their supervisor come from and is still part of the workers' group and should have their own unique set of a third set of expectations is that the supervisor came from and is still part of the workers' group and should have their values and attitudes. Conflict arises because supervisors themselves, like the workers and managers, do not know which set of expectations they should follow.

Role conflict was viewed as the lesser of two evils. Filley (1969:315) concluded after an extensive review of research literature on organizational role conflict "that it has undesirable consequences but may be the lesser of two evils."

Interpersonal Conflict

Under interpersonal conflict, one can see it as the conflict that results from two or more persons interacting with one another. Kelly (1974: 563) notes: "Conflict situations inevitably are made up of at least two individuals who hold polarized points of view, who are somewhat intolerant of ambiguities, who ignore delicate shades of grey, and who are quick to jump to conclusions."

The "Johari window" resolution method is also given as a means of

solving the conflict resulting from the idea that we consider ourselves before any other person. Looking at every thing as "you" and "me". To resolve this, the open self policy would be very paying. The "blind self" where the person understands other people more than himself, brings in more conflicts. The "Hidden-self" where one knows only about himself and not others is likely to generate conflict. The most explosive situation can result from one not discovering himself.

Litterer's Contribution

In structural conflict, Litterer (1965) suggests four causes of organizational conflict: an incompatible goals situation, the existence of incompatible means or incompatible resource allocation, a problem of status incongruities and a difference in perceptions. Conflict is most pronounced in the subsequent structural areas: Hierarchical conflict, functional, line-staff and formal-informal conflict.

Blau's Intervention?

Peter M. Blau in his book, Formal Organizations contributes no new idea. Rather he took refuge in verbiage which certain critics can recognize as devoid of any indepth analysis. For instance, he talked of conflict between supervisors and subordinates, in loyalty, lineage-state, and in demands. Perhaps the only aspects he discussed which were common among the above mentioned solutions were conflicts resulting from a clash of interests among managers, staff-line, staff and between departments.

PANACEA OR PRESCRIPTIONS FOR ENSURING HARMONY

Harmony could be gotten via the subsequent means: (i) The creation of additional agencies to meet the specific needs of underprivileged groups, a strategy which was an integral part of President Roosevelt's "New Deal" policy and was later followed by President Kennedy. (ii) The guarantee of possible maximum organizational autonomy. The relevant theory is supplied by the case for polycentricism. But a counter-argument to polycentric theory turn upon questions of policy control and coordination. The effect of increasing agency autonomy will be to weaken general political control in favour either of professional control or sectional influence, or of some mixture of these elements. The risk of greater autonomy is worth taking because more organizational autonomy can be claimed to achieve better value for money through its concentration upon simplified objectives and possible morale-boosting effects.

To arrest a situation where the government and private business men

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can have conflict, the government shifts vital functions to private hands as the management of mass communication is represented in Britain by the assignment of broadcasting to an independent corporation. Also through the judicial means, certain definitely political issues should be discussed via some what "judicialised" procedures. The third reason is persuasive, which means that the government wants to make some programme more acceptable to affected interests through reducing its direct control and appointing executives who are better trusted by potential critics. To solve the problem of conflict in organizations, some technical tasks should be handed to the technocrats in that field. For example the British Forestry Commission and the White Fish Authority perform fairly self-contained technical tasks and are also vehicles for establishing sympathetic relations with a particular industry. Also in USA, Local School Boards are usually allowed their taxation requests

In Britain, considerable care is taken to avoid examples of functional duplication. The treasury is alert to prevent overlapping jurisdiction as a likely source of financial waste and administrative confusion, and its stand is supported by the political authority of the executive and the values of the administrative class. Services for the reconciliation of agency conflicts are the same in almost all governmental systems. They entail the full use of interdepartmental committees supported by the ultimate political authority. Presidents in most cases, attempt to resolve disputes according to "dominant interest" or "sphere of influence" doctrines. For example, President Johnson signed the Urban convenor order in 1966 which empowers the secretary for Housing and Urban Development or his representatives to convene meetings and task forces for establishing consistent urban policies. To reconcile clashes of interest requires not only a unifying vision or ideal, but also the availability of resources and techniques adequate to its realization.

Role conflict can be solved by say giving the staff Engineer final decision making role over the line supervisor. The leader must be aware of the existence of role conflict within the organization, should accept conflicting job pressures, should be ready to tolerate stress and should possess a gentlemanly personality. Again, the leader should utilize the "Johari window" system of open self-the ability of a leader and even subordinates to know themselves and others. Hidden self where a person knows himself but does not know about others should be avoided just like the "blind self" where persons know about other people but not about themselves and the "undiscovered self" where the person does not know himself and others.

The "lose-lose", "lose-win" and the "win-win" are all strategies for interpersonal conflict resolution. In the "lose-lose", both parties lose, sometimes

the compromise take the middle ground, bribes are given, the use of a third party or sometime we resort to bureaucratic rules to resolve the conflict. In the lose-win, every party marshals its forces to outwit the other, hence, one loses and the other wins. While in the win-win method, energies are aimed at solving the problem rather than beating the other party.

Through the process of consultation, an outside consultant helps "the client to perceive, understand, and act upon process events which occur in the clients environment" (Schein, 1969:9). Again via the team-building technique, conflict can be resolved "probably the most important single group of intervention are the team-building activities the goals of which are the improvement and increases effectiveness of various teams within the organization"(French, 1973:29) Lastly, via keeping our ego and superego in check, many conflicts in organizations can be avoided.

CONCLUSION

To conclude however, it must be noted that most scholars admit that in some circumstances, competition is highly desirable for example, a business firm needs internal co-ordination primarily in order to compete effectively with other firms and competition for posts within the firm may contribute to this result so long as it does not destroy the acceptance of a common goal. On the contrary, organization theory is silent on the question of how much and what kind of competition is desirable between parts of the administration. The existence of conflict in a modern organizational design indicates that it can be healthy. Sometimes conflicts are initiated to benefit the organization. Conflicts can lead to innovation and change, can energize people to activity, develop protection for something else in the organization. Such factors show that conflict can be managed to work for, rather than against goal attainment in modern organizations and been important element in the systems analysis of the organisation.

Administrators should learn to cope with various conflicts, accept change as a natural consequence thereby avoiding revolutionary conflicts, and learn to resolve substantive and procedural problems that breed destructive conflict, rather than merely try to eliminate it or "sweeping the dirt (conflict) under the carpet". Therefore, academics should study the anatomy of conflicts and their solutions instead of conjuring clever tricks to evade conflicts and shamelessly resigning to fate.

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