

Conflict Transformation Strategy in Organisations in Nigeria: Roles of Counselling Psychologists

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Abstract

It has been submitted over time that conflict is inevitable in any organization mainly because of individual differences, varied interests and the push for service of self. For an individual interestingly, there are at least, three types of intrapersonal conflict, how much more would it be for many people within a social space? Problems continue to emanate in the world of work as workers have different experiences and the system in which their work may not adequately take care of their individual needs. Different strategies have been adopted by experts in human resources management in handling conflicts. However, conflict transformation strategy seems not to have been adequately adopted, and this leaves a gap in literature. This evidenced-based approach stands out as it employs conflict analysis, involving actors in the driving seat of social change, adopting principle of inclusion in peace building, using holistic human rights approach, considering moral dilemmas, and overcoming gender-specific power relations and violence. This paper highlights and discusses the roles of counselling psychologists in ensuring the use of conflict

transformation strategy in organisations in Nigeria. Recommendations are made among which is comprehensive conflict analysis and inclusive approach in effectively dealing with conflicts in the workplace.

Keywords: Conflict Transformation Strategy; Organisations, Counselling

Introduction

The biggest challenge facing humanity today is not the occurrence of conflicts, but how to fully resolve conflict whenever they arise, to prevent them from getting worse. Conflict is the same as death for humanity, and will remain inevitable. The inevitability of conflicts, however, becomes pathological to society depending on the type and nature of the resolution methods used. Many a time, the intervention mechanisms to a conflict right from its onset can be problematic and therefore can be a source of conflict itself. Kadeli, Noaga Bukhari (2013). In any organization, conflicts are a common phenomenon that causes problems as a result of misunderstandings, grievances, dissatisfaction and differences of opinion between management and employee. This has caused many activities that may be against both organizations and employee's aim and objectives. Conflicts are healthy part of all relationships that may exist in the form of individual, inter-personal and intergroup conflicts Obi, R. (2012). Conflicts are not always characterised by violence. However, they can escalate and lead to destructive outcomes, especially in the form of physical violence, and as conflicts escalate, violence is increasingly perceived as legitimate. However, conflict can also lead to new ideas, innovations, and social or political organizations, and can therefore be productive if the parties involved can manage the contradictions in a way that allows such new ideas, innovations, or forms of organization to materialize. But without conflict there can be no meaningful development.

People from all walks of life coexisting with others in their immediate environment are observed to have conflicting interests, motives, mindsets and attitudes towards life in general. Specific environments where people work may also contribute to the reason individuals are at logger heads at some points in time. Personality variations in employees contribute largely to choices, preferences and their ideals in the work environment. Behaviour truly is complex, and thus, behaviours of different people in organisations are hydra-headed indeed. In many organisations, people differ in interests and motives, ambitions, goals and drives may be the fuel behind people's actions to attain power, influence, knowledge, connection and esteem. The push for service of the self could also bring about conflict in the organisation.

There are different organizations where people belong to such as school, religious organisations, companies, political organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations to mention but a few. In all these organisations, people run the systems and make things work. There are people at the upper echelon of administration, there micro managers and there are also employers, workers who function to achieve organizational goals, mission and vision. Conflict may arise among individuals even as they work to achieve common goals. Some workers may have different processes to get to the end point. The pattern of communication and tolerance would then help to balance opposing views, ideals and character. Post conflict era in the organization is observed to be characterized with tension, mistrust, disrespect, irritability and other negative traits; hence an effective conflict transformation strategy must come to the rescue. Conflict transformation strategy must be employed in any organization where people strive for lasting peaceful coexistence and achievement of organizational goals.

In this article, there are notes on two major areas of paradigm shift in understanding of conflict. One is the move from viewing conflict as a dysfunctional occurrence to viewing conflict as constructive. This

shift is important because when people hear about conflict, what readily comes to mind is the destruction, dysfunction, and distress, total breakdown of the system, catastrophe, irreparable damage, and indelible effects of violence. Jehn (2014) explained that there are different types of conflict that differentially influence various outcomes (such as performance, satisfaction, team viability). This submission centers on the fact that conflict is beneficial and constructive depending on the outlook parties involved. Conflict sometimes leads to new thinking, new capacities, new understanding of how to handle issues, people, situations and solve problem. Many often times, have regarded conflict as a turning things the dysfunctional way, whereas, many organisations have become better, by training, retraining, and upskilling their staff as a result of conflict situations in the workplace. Conflict has pointed many organisations to the needs of their workers. Even, on a personal level, conflicts have made some people know about their strengths, limitations, and needed areas to work on towards high level of relational competence. Conflict indeed is constructive as status quo may remain unchanged and unmodified for good if conflict situations never arose. Conflict most times leaves people and organisations finding out ways to prevent a future occurrence thereby, putting strong measures of smooth flow in place. Conflict can promote team-building skills, critical thinking, new ideas, and alternative resolutions (Ronquillo, Ellis & Toney-Butler, 2023).

The second paradigm shift regarding conflict is moving from the thought that conflict is about psyche and therefore, there must be psychological functional analyses to conflict, and moving to studying conflict as an organizational phenomenon. Conflict should be studied as an organizational phenomenon involving many people functioning in an organization, and not just about an individual with personal struggles. This organisation can be work, religious, social, cultural or ecological, in this way conflict happens because people are in the organization and it is inevitable. The view of conflict as a psychological functioning will no

longer hold in the present time, because irrespective of people's personality make-up, there are other people with agenda, goals and schemes different from theirs. It will no longer serve the purpose of the present time to focus solely on the individual when we talk about conflict in the organization. Conflict often occurs as a result of more than one view, interest, motive, goal and desire, thus it is not out of place when it occurs. The very important strategy is to ensure that many parties within the organization have their needs met with proven principles, systemic/institutional frameworks, employee assistance schemes and approaches to help every employee grow within the organization. These two shifts are part of the new moves in conflict research from philosophical and political assumptions to historical and genealogical perspectives (Mikkelsen & Clegg, 2018). There are innovations in conflict research that point to holist view and understanding of organizational conflict for effectiveness in the workplace (Mikkelsen & Clegg, 2018).

In Nigeria, Sun News (2020), reports that AcademicStaff Union of Universities (ASUU) has varying degrees of disagreement with the Federal Government over non-payment of proposed and agreed salaries, failure to provide certain infrastructure to universities and refusal to register certain university professors in the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). There have been disagreements between the union and the Federal Government over inadequate funding, expansion of public universities and non-fulfillment of previous agreements. When these differences are resolved, better mutual understanding will be achieved along with better social welfare programs, which will lead to a healthier society and a more patriotic nation.

According to Miall (2004), Conflict Transformation is a comprehensive approach, addressing a range of dimensions (micro- to macro- issues, local to global levels, grassroots to elite actors, short-term to long-term timescales). To him, conflict transformation aims to develop capacity and to support structural change, rather than to

facilitate outcomes or deliver settlements. It seeks to engage with conflict at the pre-violence and postviolence phases, and with the causes and consequences of violent conflict, which usually extend beyond the site of fighting (Miall, 2004).

Conflict

Conflict has been described by various scholars and researchers, mostly according to their views as there is certainly no universally acclaimed definition of conflict. In any way conflict is described, there as a central point underscored-varied interests and motives as can be referred to as two or more value systems. For instance, conflict may be defined as: incompatibility of interests, goals, values, needs, expectations, and/or social cosmologies (or ideologies) (Dennen, 2005). Conflict is the disagreement or difference of opinions between or among individuals that can be potentially harmful to any organization (Ronquillo et al., 2023). In the workplace setting, it often involves personal agendas, insights, or goals versus the agendas, insights, or goals of the group or team (Ronquillo et al., 2023). Conflict has many types such as intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict which can be intergroup (interorganisational, intertribal, interethnic, international, intercontinental, interdenominational conflicts).

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, proposed in social psychology by Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posts that people's self-concept and social perceptions form by virtue of their in-group and out-group interactions and experiences. Social identity refers to the ways that people's self-concepts are formed and based on their membership in social groups or units. Examples include sports teams, religions, nationalities, occupations, ethnic groups, and gender. Social identity theory addresses the ways that social identities affect people's attitudes

and behaviors regarding their ingroup and the outgroup. Being members of units, departments and groups or organisations contributes greatly to sources of self-identity in the form of self-concept, thus, people feel emotional ties to their social groups. Social identities are most influential when individuals consider membership in a particular group to be central to their self-concept and they feel strong emotional ties to the group. Affiliation with a group confers self-esteem, which helps to sustain the social identity.

Social identity theory offers a motivational explanation for in-group bias. First, judgments about self as a group member are held to be associated with the outcome of social comparisons between the in-group and relevant out-groups. There is observably a sense that one's social group is superior to others'. Second, it is assumed that people desire a satisfactory self-image, and positive self-esteem. These are important psychological needs of individuals which can be got by virtue of being a member of a group within an organization. Positive self-evaluation as a group member can be achieved by ensuring that the in-group is positively distinctive from the out-group.

Application of Conflict in Organisations

Different groups within the organisations have different targets or mandates, and every member of these different groups identifies with the functioning of the group. In this regard, workers may align their personal philosophies with the group's philosophies. Workers who are emotionally tied to their respective units or groups in the organization may have disregard for other groups, and conflicts may arise as a result of this. Group loyalty may lead to intergroup and interpersonal conflict even though every staff is working to achieve the goals of the organization at large.

Significance of Conflict Transformation Strategy for Sustainable Development

Conflict transformation strategy is significant for sustainable development because it goes beyond conflict resolution to address the root causes of conflicts and find mutually beneficial solutions. As a result of conflicts, organisations can build trust and understanding between parties, leading to improved relationships and increased creativity and innovation. This can result in a more sustainable future for organisations, as conflicts are turned into opportunities for growth and development. In the Nigerian context, where conflicts often arise within specific political, economic, social, and cultural environments, conflict transformation strategy can be a powerful tool for promoting sustainable development. By envisioning and responding to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships, organisations can work towards achieving their goals of sustainable development while avoiding emotional stress and promoting a healthier society.

Conflict Transformation Strategy: Roles of Counselling Psychologists

Conflict transformation is the process of establishing structures and conditions that will help prevent early conflicts from expanding into dysfunctional and destructive ones, and that will help increase the cases of resolved conflicts (Zimmer, 2017). Often times, it has been observed that in organisations where conflicts are managed, there is bound to be organizational effectiveness. No doubt, employees would naturally respond to work space that are warm, homely, safe and non-threatening in a positive manner. There must be deployment of professionally trained counselling psychologists in every organization. This is because their scope of expertise and wherewithal covers all aspect of human life.

Counselling psychologists must be made to function in critical areas within every organization, and every member of staff must have access to trained counselling psychologists as part of employee assistance schemes in workplaces. Counselling psychologists can play their roles in conflict transformation strategy using the following approaches: conflict analysis, involving actors in the driving seat of social change, adopting principle of inclusion in peace building, using holistic human rights approach, considering moral dilemmas, and overcoming gender-specific power relations and violence.

Conflict Analysis

This is when conflict situations are critically and holistically analysed. In this analysis, the causes, effects and post-conflict era occurrences are brought to the fore in order to understand the conflict. Counselling psychologists with their training in cognitive and functional analysis can play vital role in unbiased, balanced and logical analysis of conflict in the organization and present facts and figures.

Involving Actors in the Driving Seat of Social Change

For any conflict, there are actors, hidden and open people whose agendas, interests and desires brought about the conflict situation. These people can be identified (with skills of observation and semi-structured interviews) by counselling psychologists and made to be responsive and responsible in driving change. This is not supposed to be a punitive measure, but an approach to transform them to advocates social change thereby forestalling a future occurrence of conflict. Systems change is very critical in conflict transformation, this is the reason both active and passive actors must all be involved to overhaul the stem into peace system rather than a post-conflict system. Active engagement of all individuals and parties involved in conflict in the workplace can drive system change and positive redirection.

Adopting Principle of Inclusion in Peace Building

Regarding peace building, collaboration and cooperation are much needed than focusing on few individuals in the workplace. Inclusion must be ensured when it comes to peace building. All persons irrespective of position, age, sex, experience, religion or faith must be included in the pursuit of peace. Intentionality must be at top gear as well when building peace in the organisation. Unconditional positive regards must be upheld by experts in human behaviour and all persons in the workplace feel esteemed to be involved in the growth and development of the organization through peace building. Peace building may seem trivial and easily ignored until violence (active and passive) erupts among workers and then lead to mental health issues and low productivity. The impact of endeavours for conflict transformation should not only be seen as an issue which affects the parties in conflict. It is also of direct relevance for all the individuals involved (Miall, 2004).

Using Holistic Human Rights Approach

A great strategy of conflict transformation must use human rights in the process of managing conflict. Many times, some people may feel (real or perceived) that their rights are being trampled upon in their organisation and this may cause conflict. The interesting occurrence may be other colleagues taking sides with them because they had also felt that way before. Workers may then start to form alliance or 'pity parties.' For effective conflict management, people's rights must be considered. Equity, fairness and justice must be upheld in any conflict transformation intervention in the organisation. There is a legal aspect in conflict management and counselling psychologists must ensure full consideration for it.

Considering Moral Dilemmas

In Conflict Transformation Strategy, moral twists may come to play out. Counselling psychologists must stand with what is right over who is right.

Moral dilemmas exist where people have justifications for their actions with explanations that suit their narratives only. One of the most common approaches involves asking workers to consider their own versus their counterpart's arguments and behaviours (Minson et al., 2020, Noor et al., 2019). For example, in a typical "self-other design" individuals are required to report their attitudes, predictions, or attributions regarding a particular set of events when considering them from their own perspective or from the perspective of a disagreeing other (Minson, et al, 2023).

Overcoming Gender-specific Power Relations and Violence

In power relations, aggression (whether active or passive), violence, rebelliousness and conflict, gender specificity plays out. One may find staff of organisations being gender insensitive when it comes to some issues. Objectivity must be employed in handling gender-sensitive conflicts. Counselling psychologists have been professionally trained to understand gender sensitivity and stereotyping in matters in the workplace. Boss-subordinate conflict, conflict among colleagues or conflict between staff and client will more often than not require professionalism and tactfulness.

Conclusion

Conflict Transformation Strategy can be effective within organisations in Nigeria with the assistant of counselling psychologist. Conflict is constructive, and a usual organisational phenomenon but must be approached with professionalism. Counselling psychologists have tremendous roles to play to actualise conflict transformation in organisations in Nigeria. Therefore, these professionals must be allowed to function in organisation where employee all-round wellness, productivity and attainment of organizational goals can to achieve.

Recommendations

1. Counselling psychologists must know and play their roles in any organisation they find themselves. This may be either as a paid position/job description, or as a civic virtue (organizational citizenship behaviour).
2. Every employee must have access to a trained counselling psychologist at least, once in a year within the organization. This can be part of employee assistance programmes to address intrapersonal conflict, traumas, and challenges of all kinds.
3. There should be periodic retreat for critical or managerial staff in the organization. Also, training and retraining on issues like emotional intelligence, team work, employee commitment and personality development among workers should be in place for all organisations in Nigeria.
4. Leaders in organisations in Nigeria should adopt leadership styles, decision making skills and communication patterns that will foster sense of belongingness, respect, fairness, equity and justice for all workers in the organization. This is because leaders are models to unit heads, department heads and even staff members in every organization and their management style can make or mar the organization.

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