Conflicts And Conflict Management In Academic Libraries: An Imperative For A Productive and Stress Free Work Environment

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Abstract

Academic libraries like every other human organization are significantly impacted by conflicts. Dealing with students and staff with high emotional problems vis-à-vis managing overcrowded library with insufficient library resources to serve clientele, and bad work environment combine to make academic libraries hotbeds of conflicts and discontentment. The presence of conflicts among the library workforce is capable of undermining or enhancing productivity. It can as well make a staff mentally and, or physically ill or increase his mental alertness and physical wellness. If properly managed, conflict can very well enhance growth opportunities for individuals, departments, and for the whole library. This paper presents conflict management as a positive approach to conflict and goes on to discuss its effects, positive and negative, on individuals and academic libraries as organizations. It further highlights and discusses sources of conflicts in academic libraries, which include individual differences, environmental stress, inadequate information, ambiguous rules or policies, etc. The paper further discusses strategies for effective management of conflict. Some of the strategies include application of effective communication, use of silence or ignoring method, dialoguing and clarification of rules or policies. This paper appears, therefore, to help academic library managers identify and understand the causes of conflicts in their libraries and be able to adopt appropriate measures to defuse them.

Key words: academic library, conflict, conflict management, conflict in library, conflict resolution, benefits of conflict management.

Introduction

The presence of conflict in human relationship is an incontrovertible and inevitable element whose outcomes and management strategies need a critical examination. From international politics to everyday matters of work and family life, disputes and conflicts between individuals and among groups are a regular phenomenon. Conflicts exit whenever there are important unresolved differences among people, groups, or departments. It is a disagreement in interests or ideas, and a strain in a relation that goes with strong emotion. Today, conflict is common place and usually more evidenced in organizations and workplaces where people openly and secretly campaign and compete for management's favours, even at the expense of their colleagues*.* In this contemporary performance-based work environment where employers give out hard and fast rules demanding quantitative and qualitative production or services, conflict is found to be partly a great drawback and partly a creative force for productivity. This is dependent on the management processes adopted. Conflict is sometimes latent and sometimes manifest. At times it is positive but most of the time negative and smacks of individuals and group hostility, incompatibility, and vitiates organizational solidarity, loyalty and commitment.

In places like libraries and information centers, especially academic libraries where different calibers of people from different social cultural backgrounds converge, conflict hampers effective and efficient information services delivery. It is in realization of these obvious undoing of social conflict that this paper emerges to take a close look at what conflict is, what causes it, its positive and negative effects on library workers, and its management strategies. This is with a view to discussing how library managers could adroitly handle conflicts in academic libraries so as to ensure a high level production capacity and build a stress free work environment. This has significant benefits for academic library organizations in terms of recruitment and retention, employee commitment, performance and productivity, customer satisfaction, organizational image and reputation, and avoidance of potential litigations

Conceptual definitions

For a proper understanding of the discussion that follows, this section takes care of defining the terms involved. In their effort to define conflict, Leavitt, Pondy and Boje (1980) stated that the term conflict has been used at one time or another in the literature to describe;

- antecedent conditions (such as scarcity of resources, policy differences) of conflict behavior
- affective states (for example, stress, tension, hostility, anxiety, etc) of the individuals involved,
- cognitive states of individuals i.e. their perception or awareness of conflict situations, and
  - conflict behaviours ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression.

Looking at the above definition or categorizations of conflict episodes, one may be at loss trying to determine which of these conditions, attitudes, cognition, or behavior is actually a conflict, or starts off a conflict. Continuing with this intricacy is likely to be an empty academic controversy since it will look the egg and hen, which one came first. The conceptual expressions that rise from the above should not bother any conscious mind since they are understandably a mixture of conflicts and relevant stages in conflict development. Furthering this, conflict could better be seen as a dynamic process. As such, conflict relationship behaviour between two or more individuals in an organization like library can be viewed and analyzed as a sequence of conflict episodes each beginning with conditions characterized by certain conflict potentials.

In their own view, Soreson, Malm and Forehand (1971) maintained that conflict is the presence of opposing impulses, tendencies or desires. This clearly sees conflict to mean, to come into collision, clash or to be in opposition or at variance with somebody. It is controversy, strife antagonism, disagreement in opinions and of interest or principles. Conflict depicts a situation where the disputants are hostile to each other in order to achieve goals, which are at variance with each other's.

To Wall and Callister (1995) conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. In a way, conflict is better taken to mean mutual hostility at inter-personal, inter-group, inter-cultural and interaction levels. While describing an incident involving conflict, one is usually referring to the

observable part of it, such as angry words, shouting, and actions that symbolize opposition. This depicts manifest conflict, which is only a small part of conflict process. Conflict process begins with its sources of incompatible goals, different values, and other conditions that lead one or both parties involved to perceive that conflict exists (Olorunsola, 1997). Conflict could be better conceptualized as a strain in a relationship that goes with emotion while conflict management is the process of handling conflict with the ultimate desire to vitiate and turn its negative effects into functional development. It is an expanded view that includes the understanding of the nature and sources of conflict as well as its costs. It is a positive approach to conflict that presents growth opportunities for libraries, patrons and the library workers (Kathman and Kathman, 2006).

Academic libraries are libraries designed to serve post secondary institutions such as universities, polytechnics, college of education, etc. These libraries are meant to serve the interests of their parent institutions in terms of learning, teaching, recreation and research. For effective and efficient services in academic libraries, especially university libraries, different groups of personnel are employed. These include the professional librarians and paraprofessionals. Other groups that work in the library but do not bear library cadres and positions are the executive officers, system analysts, data entry operators, cleaners, porters and bindery workers. (Ifidon & Ifidon, 2007).

A great number of people, apart from the clientele, converge in academic libraries as workers who see to the fulfillment of library goals and objectives. As they come into the libraries, they come with their personal whims and caprices, dispositions and other learned cultural values, which predispose them to hatred, treachery, antagonism and other socio-emotional conflict sources. In academic libraries, therefore, mutual hostility usually erupts and shows itself in verbal, physical and, or emotional attack. Verbal hostilities are usually expressed in the forms of rebukes, name callings, quarrels, insults, gossips, blackmailing etc (Adoni & Anie, 2006) Physical hostility on the other hand is expressed, most often, in the form of fighting, inflicting injuries, termination of appointments, demotions, punitive transfers, suspension, open violence, strike actions, withdrawal of services, etc (Elangovan, 1999). Hence, conflict can occur in libraries at inter-personal, inter-group, inter-sections, inter-organization levels such as between the university librarian and the rest of his staff, the staff and students, the senior and junior staff, the librarians and the para-professionals, etc. No worker in

academic libraries is insulated from workplace conflicts. He or she may have encountered it with students, faculty members, supervisors or co-workers. Corroborating this assertion, Shen (2008) observes "the unique features of the library workplace, such as the non- transferable library service skills and the related "jobs for life" nature of library careers; the largely detailed-oriented, recurring, civil characteristics of library work; and the need for support from above, often converge to create hotbeds of conflicts and challenges for library administrators, managers and supervisors." As a result, managing conflict in library has become a formidable task, which tests academic library managers' administrative and intellectual capacity.

Effects of conflicts on library workers

Conflict presents many negative effects on the effective management of libraries. According to Mcshane (2004) conflict leads to misunderstandings and disagreements, which usually escalate and result in negative outcomes for the organization. He further stated that conflict is bad for any institutional business because it affects staff decisions and removes their focus out of optimal services. Socio-emotional conflict does not only reduce the services of workers but increases frustrations, job dissatisfaction and job stress. In the long run, this leads to increased turnover and absenteeism (de Dreu, Harinck & Van Vianen, 1999).

In a situation where the University Librarian may be battling with his deputies, or other librarians with their subordinates, workers abandon their job for cheap politicking and gossiping. At this instance, relations deteriorate as the colleagues respond by spreading malicious and destructive falsehood. Conflict leads to considerable delay in giving out and implementing official decisions. It also leads to excessive firing and unnecessary hiring. (Wallace, 2001)

Latent conflict when manifested at times result's in open combat which most often ends up in injuring staff, destroying library property and losing valuable resource materials. At times, this situation leads to the staff trying to instigate students against the management, which may lead to burning down the library. If a conflict episode is not quickly and skillfully handled, workers could begin to do very mean things and many of them may be locked up, suspended or demoted. Latent conflict could remain latent yet cripples the smooth running of the library. Really, conflict among individuals, management and subordinates puts an employee in touch with the darker side of his personality and that of other workers (Mcshane, 2004).

Conflict at any level leaves one in a state of uneasiness or strong anxiety until it is resolved. For this reason, conflict when dysfunctional makes one feel tense, irritable, sleepless and unable to concentrate on whatever he does. This is because most of the worker's time and attention will be on the conflicting issues as they get excessively involved in worrying and talking about it, even when it is inappropriate to do so (Sorenson, Malm, Forehand, 1971).

The above notwithstanding, conflict is, at times, beneficial. This is so where inter-group conflict improves and escalates team dynamics within those units. Groups usually increase their cohesiveness and task orientation when they face any external threat. Under conditions of moderate threat or conflict, the team gets motivated to work more efficiently towards an organization's goal, thereby increasing the group's productivity and efficient information delivery. Conflict and conflict management can avail themselves as the best drivers of positive change in an environment devoid of stress and rancour, especially when handled with a sense of maturity. Conflict and conflict management in library deal with disagreements arising from differences in ideas or interests, and their efficient handling for optimal productivity and peaceful coexistence (Edwards &Walton, 2000). They enhance productivity and keep all stakeholders happy. However, poorly handled, the processes of conflict and conflict management undermine and damage team cohesion, mutual respect, alignment and trust   Again, task-related conflict helps people to recognize problems, identify a variety of solutions and better understand the issues that are relevant.

The brief analysis of the dysfunctional and functional aspect of conflict in academic libraries depicts that conflict has a double face. And since it is an unavoidable phenomenon in human existence and interactions, what is vital is to devise a means of curtailing its constancy and excesses through management strategies.

Sources of social conflict
Whenever manifest conflict in a library as well as every other human organization, the most likely cause or causes could be found in one or more of the following conditions discussed below.
Incompatible goals
Many writers have accepted that incompatible goals constitute one of the commonest sources of conflict among workers (Tinsley & Brett, 2000). This usually arises when one employee's or department's work

goals seem to clash or interfere with another's goals. For instance, if the goals desired to be achieved by the circulation unit interferes with those of the reference unit of the library, there is bound to be conflict. This could occur as a result of poor goals or role definition by the management. As conflict arises, persons or departments involved would want to be given the highest possible rights, favour or seniority levels to improve their career and job status. Once either of the parties receives such rights or privileges, the other would want to subtly draw back or sabotage any decision intended to expedite management action and optimal services. The point being made here is that people or departments with divergent goals are more likely to experience conflicts (Adoni & Eruvwe, 2004; Bagshaw, 1998).

Task interdependence

This is another serious source of social conflict, which erupts when various units of an organization function as an entity to accomplish reselected goals. For instance, if libraries are involved in team teaching, those who are to introduce the historical or conceptual aspects of the course might delay or hinder the subsequent groups from teaching the succeeding parts. This could as well arise where there is a clash between two groups over the use of a particular facility such as classrooms or computers. They cause workplace conflict and are in consonance with Dessler (2008), who stated that with reciprocal interdependence, employees are highly dependent on each other and consequently, have a higher probability of interfering with each other's work and personal goals. He further observed that task interdependence exists where team members must share common inputs to their individual tasks and need to interact in the process of executing the work or receiving outcomes (such as reward) that are partly determined by the other's performance. The higher the level of task interdependence, the greater the risk of conflict because there is a greater chance that each side will disrupt or interfere with the other side's goals (Leung & Jjosovold 1998).

Ambiguous rules

In libraries where vague rules and regulations exist or where there are no rules at all, conflict is sure to arise. This is because ambiguous rules make efficient and effective decision taking and implementation difficult, as those involved struggle incessantly those to maneuver power and resources for their selfish ends. This is because ambiguity increases the risk that one party or individual engaged in conflict episodes consciously interfere with the other's goals. Hence, Olorunsola (1997)

observed that ambiguity in ways and means of doing something encourages political maneuvering and leads conflicting members to enter into a free-for-all battle to win decision in their favour. Whenever and wherever clear rules exist, peaceful co-existence obtains because workers know what to expect from others.

Scares resources

Many resources needed in libraries and other human organizations are usually not enough to go round all the staff. This might lead to great pressure upon the workers on how to meet the clientele's demands. Scare resources, therefore, generate conflict since this motivates people to compete with others who also need the same resources to achieve their own objectives (Leung&Jjosovold, 1998). Conflicts from this angle would be non-existent if every library worker could receive the highest salaries, enjoy the longest vacations and have the best and up-to date library stock to serve clientele. But this is hardly the case.

Differentiation

Industrial and group differences resulting from biological, social, educational and cultural backgrounds have been identified as a significant source of socio-emotional conflict. In libraries, workers from different places with training and cultural diversities converge to form a new relationship. These differences make it harder for them to understand or accept the beliefs and values of the workers outside their clique. Moreover, the present workforces, even in libraries, experience the rising incidence of cross-generation conflict. This is because employers across age groups work together now more than ever. This brings lack of consensus on how to reason and how to do things. Hence, Edwards and Walton, (2000) observed that younger and older employees have different needs, different expectations, and somewhat different values, which reveals themselves in many types of conflicts.

Communication problems

Where there is no free flow of information or well-defined communication network in an academic library, there is bound to be conflict. Conflicts often occur due to lack of opportunities, abilities or motivation to communicate effectively. In many of our academic libraries, management hardly creates opportunity that allows for upward and horizontal communication. When two parities lack the opportunity to communicate, they tend to rely on stereotypes to explain past behaviours. Stereotypes are very subjective and tent to distort the true meaning of the opponent's' actions, thereby causing social conflict. Sometimes,

librarians may lack the proper knowledge of effective communication skills (Iffidon &Ugwuanyi, 2013). They may also be passive and aggressive in their communication styles. These attitudes impede proper human relations and help release conflicts among librarians. For lack of assertiveness among workers, conflict exists, as they are not given official backing or motivation to speak out. This therefore, tends to make them feel uncomfortable interacting with co-workers from different cultural milieu. They are less motivated to engage in dialogue with others.

Strategies for conflict management in academic libraries

Although some writers on conflict and conflict management have argued that some amount of conflict is, in fact, useful in any social organization, unrestricted conflict is harmful to organizations like academic libraries, and must therefore be kept in check. Conflict management styles, therefore, refer to how one approaches the other party in a conflict situation. These styles involve altering the underlying structural causes of potential conflict (Mcshane, 2004). This section is designed to examine factors that enhance conflict management strategies. Some of them are briefly discussed below.

Clarification of rules and procedures

As discussed earlier, some conflicts are offshoots of ambiguous rules and decisions vis-à-vis the allocation of scare resources. Consequently, establishing clear rules and instructions can minimize these conflicts. This is necessary since rules clarify the distribution of resources such as stating when students can use personal computers and for how long they can borrow library materials. In social relationships as found in academic libraries, unambiguous rules enable those involved in relation or social interaction to know what to do and where to go or where to stop (Adoni & Anie, 2006). If library management would therefore avoid conflict with their subordinates and among subordinates, it therefore behooves the management to clarify all rules and regulations, instructions and orders being passed on to the staff.

Increasing resources

In as much as competition among library workers or different units over scarce resources exists and breeds socio-emotional conflicts, the need to increase these resources becomes important. Even though it is not easy to beef up some of the needed resources because of the financial and human resources constraints, the management has to gradually plan ahead. For instance, if personal computers, printers and lecture rooms are

found to be numerically of low strength, efforts should be made to enhance the provision. This is vital so as to cut down the great cost of dysfunctional conflicts arising from competition over scarce resources.

Improvement of communication and understanding

Discussing conflict management without talking about this factor of communication can hardly be complete. This is because of the critical importance of communication to effective conflict management. For conflict to be reduced to the barest minimum among library workers, management must encourage its workers to be meeting and communicating as individuals, groups or departments. By improving the opportunity, ability and motivation to share information, employees develop less negative perception of each other than when they rely on stereotypes and emotions. Direct communication provides a better understanding of coworkers. It is particularly important where the need for functional specialization makes it difficult to reduce differentiation (Fisher, Maltz& Jaworsiki, 1997). Corroborating this statement, Mcshane (2004) quoted Jamy Harvy as stating that the more informal communication that happens between various groups or individuals, they better they co-habit and work together as a team.

Dialoguing

Through dialogue, the people in conflict episodes are brought together to expose and discuss the issues and problems involved in the conflict. This is aimed at gaining a clearer view of the factors causing and promoting the conflict. In this instance, the library management takes the initiative to bring the conflicting parties into meaningful dialogue, face to face, to examine and discuss the issues involved. In dialogue those involved in conflict have the opportunity to air their feelings, grievances and views on the matter at hand. It frees the mind from grudges and bitterness and helps workers forget the past and move on. It also helps participants understand each other's mental models and fundamental assumptions so that they can create a common thinking process and mental models for the team (Ellinor & Gerald, 1994) Dialogue is a very vital way of managing conflict. Hence dialogue, persuasive speeches, exchange of ideas, empathy and good communication can be used to achieve conflict management (Isaacs, 1993).

Silence or ignoring method

This is another veritable way of managing conflicts among library workers. It involves patiently overlooking or ignoring the conflict

episodes to depict that the conflict lacks due merit and attention. This at times takes the style of delay tactics, which are capable of disarming the combatants emotionally as they wait for days or months without any visible or practical action on the part of the management. The accumulated emotional anger can get extinguished as the delay, neglect or silence continues. This delay method is commonest in law courts where constant postponement wears out both the complainant and the plaintiff, and forces them to begin to dismiss their built-up emotions. However this strategy should be used sparingly since a neglected or silenced problem may gather momentum and erupt like a volcano after-wards. It may then do greater harm.

Empathy

This is a process of reasoning by analogy, of explaining someone's behaviour to yourself by finding a parallel in your own feeling of another (Sorenoso, Malm & Forehand, 1971). Empathy involves putting oneself into the feeling of others, understanding them, and thereby, reducing aggression against them. In this case, the management has to emphasize this method of resolving conflict to the workers, especially to the conflicting partners. It enhances forgiveness and forgetfulness.

Other useful ways that enhance conflict management in academic libraries and other organizations include arbitration, confrontation, catharsis, address by influential personalities, culture of civility, separation of conflicting workers, and so on.

If the above discussed management strategies are skillfully applied in academic libraries, where there is a great assemblage of workers from different socio-economics and cultural backgrounds, workers would likely work side by side for the achievement of institutional objectives. These strategies are also likely to improve the social climate of academic library workers. The result of this improvement would be an atmosphere of serenity and cordiality, which invariably will enhance administration of libraries. It will also enhance the productive capacity and efficient information service delivery by workers, who are not only bereft of antagonism but also poised to satisfy the yearnings of the administration of academic libraries. Hence, Krautter(2013) opines that a central issue in any library becomes the balance between creating an atmosphere in which creativity thrives and ideas are openly discussed, while avoiding a toxic environment of continual unproductive interpersonal conflict.

Conclusion

Academic libraries like every other human organization are characterized by conflicts, whose results may be functional or dysfunctional, depending on the extent and the management process. The inevitable incidence of conflicts in academic libraries derive its force from the presence of a staggering number of personalities from diverse socio- cultural background and with contrasting values that converge as library workers. The libraries also have many other clientele who troupe into them for research, teaching and learning. They equally may arrive with more conflicting value systems, pent up grievances, unfulfilled expectations, and would be seriously competing for the available scarce resources. Moreover, the non-transferability of library service skills, need for support from parental institutions, emergence and growth of competitiveness among information providers and constant technological changes often weave together to create challenges and hotbeds of conflict for library workers. In this situation, discussing conflicts and conflict management becomes imperative, not only to enable academic library managers to know how to manage workplace conflict but also to beat off library stress and make library workers more productive in their services delivery.

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