Causes and Effects of Conflict on Teacher Morale in Public Primary Schools in Eldoret Municipality, Kenya

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Abstract

Studies show that human resource managers spend 24 to 60 percent of their time on trying to solve employee disputes (Bell, 2002). In many cases, effective conflict resolution skills can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes. However, the role of the teachers as pertaining causes and effects of conflict is generally unknown. The study was guided by the conflict resolution theory proposed by Philip (1982) which argues that, the fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing as long as it is resolved effectively however it can lead to personal and professional growth. The study targeted head teachers and teachers in public primary schools in Eldoret Municipality. The study adopted simple random, stratified and purposive sampling techniques. The target population was 60 teachers and by using simple random sampling the head teachers and teachers was stratified into stratas. Data collected was processed, coded and analyzed to facilitate answering the research questions. This was done using descriptive statistics. The study found out that restricted and poor communication channelswere the causes of conflicts and that conflicts could result to frustration, anger, fear, distrust or resentment among the teachers.

The findings of this study and recommendations would provide good practical and theoretical background for conflict management in primary schools in the municipality and other organizations in Kenya.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution, conflict management, morale

Introduction

Conflict is a basic social process; there is no conceivable way of removing all conflict from an organization (woodland, 1990). Interpersonal conflict, often created by interdependency of people and tasks within an organization, lowers staff morale and employee productivity and drives people away. Difficult employees who foster conflicts fall into five distinct categories: attention seekers, control players, concealers, innovative malcontents and revengers (Bell, 2002). It would seem that in any type of employee conflict, the manager has a major decision to make in terms of ignoring the conflict or intervening in it (Condliffe, 1991). While it is not an easy decision to make, the ability to decide properly is an important skill for a manager. In managing conflict, a key element is feedback, which can be used as an effective communication tool.

Employee feedback allows the individual responsible for conflict management to have a certain degree of awareness of potential conflict sources within an organization; this is the first meaningful step toward both prevention and effective management of conflict (Burke, 1996). Therefore, conflict management—above all else—requires accomplished communication skills. Human resource managers report spending 24 to 60 percent of their time dealing with employee disputes (Burke, 1996). The number of violent incidents in the workplace has been increasing steadily, according to a study by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), nearly 60 percent of respondents said violence had occurred in their organization during the past three years, and they identified "personality conflicts" as the leading cause (Career Press, 1993).

Like birth, death, choice, and change conflict is a constant fact of life. It's also a fact of the workplace, especially when you deal or interact with people. While disagreements and differing opinions are normal, even healthy, in work relationships, conflicts can cause your company productivity, money and employee satisfaction. Fifty three percent of workers say they lost time at work worrying about a past or future confrontation with a co-worker (Bell, 2003).

Employee morale

Employee morale is instrumental in creating a unified and functional work environment. Morale influences the beliefs and actions of an individual or unit, as well as dictates the atmosphere demonstrated by confidence, discipline, and willingness to perform assigned tasks (Dictionary.Com, 2003). Morale also symbolizes a dedicated spirit which symbolizes a dedicated spirit which unifies individuals toward a common goal (Dictionary.Com, 2003). Clearly, morale is an emotional state which joins employees together in order to achieve organizational goals.

The organization consists of a synchronized social unit, formed to operate uninterrupted in order to perform universal objectives (Freeman, 1999).

Proper evaluation of morale must include levels of measurement to determine the mood as exhibited by staff members. This assessment will determine morale levels to be either positive or negative, depending on the influences upon personnel behaviors. Positive or high morale, eases employee motivation, encourages teamwork, and unifies towards the organizational mission. High morale will allow correctional staff a positive self-image, promote professionalism, and properly perform assigned tasks. Positive morale is built from the foundation of an organization, the motivation from effective leaders, and the positive influence by the peer group. Conversely, negative, or low morale, has many adverse consequences for the cohesion of the unit as a whole.

Negative morale may lead to complacency and inattention to duties, which is a dangerous problem facing correctional employees (Vellani, 2001). Other harmful effects of low morale include increased turnover, tardiness absenteeism and abuse of sick time (Vellani, 2001; Garland, 2002). These results not only increase the amount of stress facing correctional staff, but create a multitude of personnel issues for supervision and administration. Negative morale reduces individual and group performance levels. Low morale tends to escalate throughout the ranks until, ultimately it poisons the entire institution.

Definition of conflict

Conflict, generally is disagreements or an expressed struggle between and among individuals over incompatible goals, resources, or rewards (Borisoff and Victor, 1989). According to Pierce & Gardner (2002), a conflict begins when one party perceives that another party has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, one or more of their concerns.

In an organization, a conflict can be defined as a process of opposition and confrontation that can occur in organizations between either individuals or groups, when parties exercise power in the pursuit of valued goals or objectives and obstruct the progress of other parties (Wagner III & Hollenbeck 2002).According to De Bono (1985), Conflict may be defined as the struggle or contest between people who have opposing ideas, needs, beliefs, goals and even values. He further defines conflict clearly as a clash of interests, values, actions views or directions.

Conflicts may emanate from more than one source, disagreements and differences in styles, principles, values, beliefs, different ideological and philosophical outlooks, different status and a host of many other reasons. However, Kirchoff and Adams (1982) states that there are four distinct conditions under which conflicts may arise.

These include: ambiguous roles and responsibilities, high stress environments, multiple boss situations and even the prevalence of advanced technology**.** The emergence of conflicts has both positive and negative effects on the organization. Although conflict is often viewed negatively, it can lead to enlightenment if solutions are reached. The first logical steps in resolving conflict is to identify the problem and then identify what caused the conflict. Bell (2002) suggests six reasons for conflict in the workplace: conflicting needs, conflicting styles, conflicting perceptions, conflicting goals, conflicting pressures, and conflicting roles. Hart (2000) discusses two addition causes of conflict: different personal values and unpredictable policies. This brings the total causes for conflict to eight;

Causes of Conflict in Organizations

Conflicting Needs

Whenever workers compete for scarce resources, recognition, and power in the company's "pecking order", conflict can occur. Since everyone requires a share of the resources (office space, supplies, the boss's time, or the budget fund) to complete their jobs (Hart, 2002), it should come as no surprise when the "have-nots" gripe and plot against the "haves' (Bell, 2002). Conflict between employees in the workplace is a natural element of worthwhile communication. Conflict could occur at all managerial levels of interaction in the organization. It would likely to arise when there is a change in the organizations and individual strive to cope with their mutual interdependency in a changing organizational environment (Andrews & Herschel 1996).

Conflicting Styles

Because individuals are individuals, they differ in the way they approach people and problems. Associates need to understand their own style and learn how to accept conflicting styles. Personality tests, such as Myers-Briggs Personality Type Inventory (MBTI), can help people explore their instinctive personality styles (Bell, 2002). Example of conflicting styles would be where one worker works best in a very structured environment while another worker works best in an unstructured environment.

These two workers could easily drive each other crazy if they constantly work in conflict with one another and do not learn to accept one another's work style. When conflict occurs, the relationship may be weakened and indirectly will affect productivity, working environment and organization's goal as a whole. However, conflict not always hinder progress towards desired goals, it also can serve as a red flag signalling for the need of change (Wagner III & Hollenbeck 2002) and contributes to positive impact for the organization.

Conflicting Perceptions

Just as two or more workers can have conflicting styles, they can also have conflicting perceptions. They may view the same incident in dramatically different ways. Bell (2002) gives an example of what might happen if a new administrative assistant were hired in the organization. One associate might see the new hire as an advantage (one more set of hands to get the job done), while another associate might see the same new hire as an insult (a clear message that the current associates are not performing adequately). Memos, performance reviews, company rumors, hallway comments, and client feedback are sources for conflicting perceptions. What was meant gets lost in a firestorm of responses to perceived wrongs (Bell, 2002). Resentment and conflict can also occur when one department is viewed as more valuable to the organization than others (Hart, 2002).

Conflicting Goals

Associates may have different viewpoints about an incident, plan, or goal. Problems in the workplace can occur when associates are responsible for different duties in achieving the same goal. Take for instance the scenario of a patient being admitted to a hospital. The business office is responsible for documenting financial information and getting paid, whereas the nursing staff is responsible for the patient's physical assessment and immediate admission. Both objectives are important and necessary, but may cause conflict (Bell, 2002). Brett (2000) offers another example where a bank teller's dilemma in a situation where he is being given conflicting responsibilities by two of his managers. The head teller has instructed the staff that rapid service is the top priority, whereas the community relations director has instructed the staff that that quality customer service is the top priority.

One can imagine how quickly problems could arise between the teller and the head teller if speed is sacrificed for quality time with the customer.

Conflicting Pressures

Conflicting pressures can occur when two or more associates or departments are responsible for separate actions with the same deadline. For example, Manager A needs Associate A to complete a report by 3:00 p.m., which is the same deadline that Associate B needs Associate A to have a machine fixed. In addition, Manager B (who does not know the machine is broken) now wants Associate B to use the unbeknownst broken machine before three p.m. The extent to which we depend on each other to complete our work can contribute greatly to conflict (Hart, 2002).

Conflicting Roles

Conflicting roles can occur when an associate is asked to perform a function that is outside his job requirements or expertise or another associate is assigned to perform the same job. This situation can contribute to power struggles for territory. This causes intentional or unintentional aggressive or passive-aggressive (sabotage) behavior. Everyone has' experienced situations where associates have wielded their power iii inappropriate ways (Bell, 2002).

Different Personal Values

Conflict can be caused by differing personal values. Segregation in the workplace leads to gossiping, suspicion, and ultimately, conflict. Associates need to learn to accept diversity in the workplace and to work as a team (Hart, 2002).

Unpredictable Policies

Whenever company policies are changed, inconsistently applied, or non-existent, misunderstandings are likely to occur. Associates need to know and understand company rules and policies; they should not have to guess. Otherwise, unpredictable things can occur such as associates dressing inappropriately or giving out wrong information. The absence of clear policies or policies that are constantly changing can create an environment of uncertainty and conflict (Hart, 2002).

Effects of conflict on employee morale

Effectively dealing with people and their productivity is a huge part of the responsibility assigned to all managers, and employees often find their morale affected by the management style of their supervisors (World Bank, 2005). It is important for managers to realize that a one-size-fits-all approach to conflict management is inadequate for the simple reason that people are different (Hart, 2000). Different personalities respond to different management styles; getting to know individual employees will help a manager determine how best to use various management controls to motivate different employees and boost their morale even in the midst of conflicts.

This notion centers on the issue of communication. A close employee-management relationship opens the door for trust and familiarity between hence managers and their employees then resolves conflicts in the workplace amicably (Kindler, 1998). In a study that explores the relationship between employee self-esteem, workplace conflicts and different types of management styles - referred to here as "supervisor powers" - Bora and Philips (2001) examines the uses of reverent power (power based upon the manager's attractive characteristics), expert power (power based upon the manager's expertise and knowledge), and coercive power (power based on the

manager's ability to inflict aversive outcomes or punishments). While the study's hypothesis that the use of coercive power negatively affects employee morale proved inconclusive, Bora et al (2001), were able to conclude that when supervisors exercised expert or referent power, both of which require effective communication to be successful, the impact on employee self-esteem was positive. In her article on reviving staff spirit, Scott (2001) refers to another type of management style that is usually thought of negatively by employees' micro managing. Scott argues that micro-managing is the "surest way to kill staff spirit and commitment in the midst of conflicts in an organization." The essential problem with micro-managing is that it does the opposite of empowering employees; rather, it makes them feel as if management doesn't trust them to perform their duties skillfully or accurately and thus fuels conflicts.

Managers face the challenge of keeping employees motivated and committed during even in the midst of conflicts. In his article on the effects of restructuring and downsizing on hospital staff, Burke (1996) states this concept in a nutshell that, "The degree to which a facility supports its employees during conflicts directly affects staff satisfaction and wellbeing." Managers must serve as an example and set the tone for a positive work environment, especially during a period of transformation; they need to accept any pending changes in the work environment before they can successfully convince their employees to accept them (Bennett 2001).

In order to improve employee productivity and morale, it is important for managers to allow employees to help set department or organizational goals and resolve their conflicts amicably. Employees will work harder to reach goals if they're involved in setting them (Kindler. 1998).

Employees resent being left out of the loop, especially when changes are going on, which can cause them to be cynical about future endeavors, their supervisors, and the company.

If kept uninformed, they may also assume the worst - which their jobs are at risk. Managers need to stress both positive and negative aspects of change and be honest about the company's future.

Open communication should especially be a priority when introducing any new initiatives (Messmer, 2001 b). In short, informed employees are happier employees; they function better, feel like part of the team, and adjust to change more easily. If management's goal is to maintain high employee morale within their organization, part of the process will involve empowering employees to act independently when appropriate by being able to resolve conflicts that arise from within and from outside. Giving employees the room to grow professionally - and that includes allowing them to make mistakes - will increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, thereby boosting their morale (Lye, 2005).

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted in Eldoret Municipality using a limited, but justified, number of respondents. It is possible that the findings on the factors pertaining causes and effects of conflict on teacher morale in public schools may not have been generalizable to other places in Kenya owing to different regional challenges. Nevertheless, the study provided a framework through which scholars could conduct similar studies and recommend for appropriate solutions to the problems on conflicts in schools and other organizations in Kenya.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Eldoret town. The town is a major centre for industrial, commercial and agricultural activities.

It has a well-established infrastructure and a good geographical climate liked by many (Republic of Kenya, Uasin Gishu Development Plan 1997-2001).

It is cosmopolitan town and teachers who teach in the Municipality come from different communities. The author employed descriptive survey design because the findings needed to be generalized over a large population. The study used both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

The target population of the study comprised head teachers, teachers who are believed to have taught in the Municipality for the past three years and are deemed to have adequate understanding of conflicts in the schools. Eldoret Municipality was chosen because it is a cosmopolitan town with many diverse communities living together harmoniously. The study employed stratified sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling.

The research population was grouped into strata's of head teachers, deputies', senior teachers and assistant teachers Since each member of the population had an equal and independent chance of being selected, simple random sampling technique was used to select the representative sample. Purposive sampling techniques was used as the author targeted a group of people believed to be reliable and would provide information with respect to the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

In order to achieve the main purpose of this study which was to find out the causes and effects of conflict on teacher morale, the major findings of the study indicated that the majority 41(68.3%) of the respondents agreed that restricted and poor communication channels causes conflicts in the schools.

This implied that communication barriers such as poor channels are a source of conflict in schools because when a teacher wants to raise an issue then he/she has no channels to solve such disputes.

Further, 41 (68.3%) of the respondents cited looking for allies to enhance one's position as a cause of conflict in organizations since this brought about favoritism in the work place.

Others 28(46.7%) strongly agreed that information overload is a source of conflict in schools. as shown

Causes of Conflict

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Blocking of motivation drive before a person reaches a desired goal	32 53.3%	17 28.3%	7 11.7%	2 3.3%	2 3.3%	60 100%
Role ambiguity	19 31.7%	30 50.0%	3 5.0%	7 8.3%	1 5.0%	60 100%
Contradictory roles of the same teachers	23 38.3%	29 48.3%	3 5.0%	5 8.3%	- 0%	60 100%
Looking for allies to enhance one's position	13 21.7%	41 68.3%	3 5.0%	1 1.7%	2 3.3%	60 100%
Competing for the sake of competing	21 35.0%	28 46.7%	3 5.0%	5 8.3%	3 5.0%	60 100%
Perceiving something out of context	32 53.3%	17 28.3%	8 13.3%	2 3.3%	1 1.7%	60 100%
Poor performance criteria	16 26.7%	31 51.7%	10 16.7%	2 3.3%	1 1.7%	60 100%
Interdependence and shared performance resources	19 31.7%	21 35.0%	1 1.7%	12 20.0%	7 11.7%	60 100%
Poor channels of communication	41 68.3%	13 21.7%	3 5.0%	1 1.7%	2 3.3%	60 100%
Information overload	28 46.7%	21 35.0%	3 5.0%	5 8.3%	3 5.0%	60 100%

Effects of Work Place Conflicts on Teacher Morale

In order to achieve the main objective of this study, the researcher sought to find out the effects of conflicts on teacher morale. The study findings indicated that the majority 51 (85.0%) of the respondents agreed that conflicts could result to frustration, anger, fear, distrust or resentment. This implied that conflicts in the workplace affect the emotional as well as physical wellbeing of teachers. The distortion in form of anger, fear, distrust or resentment is bound to negatively affect the productivity of the employees. The findings further showed that 34 (56.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that conflict at the conflict strongly lowers employees morale. The findings led the researcher to find out in overall the perception teachers had on the effects of conflicts on their morale at the work place as shown.

STATEMENT	Strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	Strongly agree	total
Conflicts can result to frustration, anger, fear, distrust or resentment.	7 11.7%	1 1.7%	1 1.7%	42 70.0%	9 15.0%	60 100%
Conflict between persons, personality and expectations of the role may reduce productivity.	31 51.7%	10 16.7%	- 0%	10 16.7%	9 15.0%	60 100%
Conflicts may lead to unclear obligations of the employees' role.	2 3.4%	14 23.3%	2 3.3%	17 28.3%	25 41.7%	60 100%
Conflict at the workplace may lead to role ambiguity.	17 28.3%	2 3.3%	1 1.7%	16 26.7%	24 40.0%	60 100%
Conflict at the workplace may lead to aggression, withdrawal and fixation of the employee.	6 10.0%	28 46.7%	9 15.0%	9 15.0%	8 13.3%	60 100%
Conflict at the workplace lowers employee morale	3 5.0%	- 0%	9 15.0%	14 23.2%	34 56.7%	60 100%

Effects of Work Place Conflicts on Teacher Morale

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found out that restricted and poor communication channels caused conflicts in the schools, this implied that communication barriers such as poor channels was a source of conflict in schools and that teachers should be free to raise and solve issues. Conflicts in schools affects teachers morale negatively and reduces their work productivity hence open communication should be a way of resolving it. The distortion in form of anger, fear or distrust is bound to affect teachers' emotional and physical well-being therefore to maintain high morale within a school set up may involve empowering teachers to act independently when appropriate by being able to resolve conflicts that arise from within and from outside the school setup.

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