MORAL AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP INTEGRITY AND MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICTS IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the relevance of moral authority and leadership integrity in the management of conflicts in the Nigerian University system. This was for the purpose of highlighting some copious leadership characteristics that are contingent to organizational goal achievement in Nigerian Universities. It was established that leadership behavior that could encourage subordinate supportiveness in managing organizations is essential in conflict management. Also, the paper submitted that University is a complex organization with its heterogeneous work-force; hence the need for the stakeholders and workers to be taken care of in wealth and power distribution, for leadership effectiveness in managing conflict within the University system. Also, the development of team building that could facilitate workers’ proficiency vis-à-vis peaceful co-existence is central to effective conflict management. It was therefore recommended that recognition of workers’ organization coupled with even distribution of wealth and power should be encouraged for effective conflict management in Nigerian Universities. Also, participatory management style should be encouraged by the Chief Executive in Nigerian Universities for harmonious labour management relations.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a natural and inevitable phenomenon in any interactive situation involving human beings and it is ubiquitous at all levels of human social systems. Conflicts abound when there are conflicting objectives, methods, philosophies, or missions and the desire of managers to protect jurisdictions, control resources or acquire power. Conflicts arise when domains are established and expanded or when they are defended against erosion or attack. Conflict is the breakdown in the standard mechanism or decision making so that an individual or group experiences difficulty in selecting an alternative.

Conflict is universal in human affairs but so are forces that mediate and resolve conflict. The forces of change and the close collaborations that are needed in working produce abundant opportunities for conflict. Interestingly, conflict goes with change and it is generated in the re-ordering of interests affected by change. Most researchers agree that conflict is endemic within industrial relations. Some regard conflict as totally disruptive and dysfunctional whereas others recognize that conflicts may have positive functions. For example, Funk and Wagnalls (Bossart, 1980) define conflict as a struggle to resist, contest opposing forces, come into collision. Such opposing forces must be in a context of interdependence. In other words, mutual dependence between parties in conflict is necessary to make collision a mutual concern and a problem to solve. Bossart (1980) sees conflict as any instance when incompatible occur; which may be between two or more persons, groups or nations.
Wright (1957) is of the view that many of the processes which characterize conflict in one area also characterize it in others. According to him, the characteristics of social conflict as follows:

- a) at least two parties having some minimum degree of ‘contact’ with ‘visibility’ to each other;
- b) mutual exclusive and/or incompatible values and opposed values based on ‘resources scarcity’ or on position scarcity;
- c) (i) behaviors designed to destroy, injure, thwart, or otherwise control another party or parties; and (ii) a relationship in which the parties can gain relatively only at each other’s expenses;
- d) mutually opposed actions and counter-actions; and
- e) attempts to acquire power, or to influence behaviour in certain directions, or actual acquisition or exercise of power.

Coser (1968) is of the view that conflict is a struggle over values or claims, to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.

Boulding (1962) identified the field of conflict in all situations as “that set of relevant variables within which conflict movements may occur that make one party worse off and one better off in their own estimation”. From the literature review of industrial relations, international politics, religious conflict, interracial relations, group theory, and organizations theory, Wright (1957) came up with a set of properties that identify and characterize conflict phenomenon and situations as follows:

- a) Conflict requires a minimum of two analytical distinct unit entities such as a person, groups or organization;
- b) Conflict arises from position scarcity or resource scarcity;
- c) Conflictual behaviours are those designed to destroy, injure, thwart, or otherwise control another party or other parties, and a conflict relationship is one in which the parties can gain (Relatively) only at each other’s expense;
- d) Conflict requires interaction among parties in which actions and counteractions are mutually opposed;
- e) Conflict relations always attempt to gain control of scarce resources and positions and to influence behaviours in certain directions;
- f) Conflict relations constitute a social action process having important consequences (cost-profit dimension);
- g) A conflict process or relation represents a temporary tendency towards disjunction in the interaction between parties;
- h) Conflict relations do not represent a breakdown in regulated conduct but rather a shift in the governing norms and expectations.

**Universities as Complex Organizations**

Analysts of higher education have long pointed out that Universities are complex organizations that are different in major respects from industrial organizations, government departments and firms. In comparison to other organizations, Universities must grapple with the following:

- (i) They rarely have a single clearly articulated mission and thus suffer from goal ambiguity, and must therefore build decision, processes that can grapple with a higher degree of uncertainty and conflict;
- (ii) They are people processing institutions that serve clients, that is, students who typically demand a voice in the decision-making processes;
- (iii) They are professionalized organizations in which employee demand a large measure of control over institutional decision processes;
- (iv) They are increasingly vulnerable to external political, economic and demographic pressures that make internal decision-making more difficult.
These and other similar characteristics have led higher education theorists to describe Universities as 'organized anarchies' and 'loosely coupled system' (Onokerhoraye 2000:3). Thus there is a great diversity of relatively strong subcultures that co-exist on any particular campus. This leads to powerful differences of perception, opinion and lifestyle, which are common sources of conflict. The existence of these subcultures makes campuses unique conflict laboratories where individuals with great perceptual and value-based differences must co-exist in an environment. The responsibility of University management is, therefore, to bridge the gaps between different campus domains by trying to reweave and strengthen a University's loosely coupled system in ways that will reduce destructive conflict. Sensitivity of University managers to the potential existence of subcultures and subclimates is important for the effective management of the conflicts within the system.

The complexity of the Universities is further heightened by the type of labour that exists within the system. Universities are organizations where labour is heterogeneous unlike most organizations. In the civil service for example the only organized labour union that fights for and protects the interest of civil servants is the Civil Service Workers' Union. This means in effect that government only negotiates with this body to get issues in contest resolved. This situation does not exist in the Universities where we have a minimum of three distinct types of labour namely, the Academic Staff Union (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU). Each of these bodies protects the interests of its rank and file members namely ASUU for academic staff, SSANU for Senior non-academic staff and NASU for junior staff. Therefore, whenever there is any grouse between workers and either the University or government, there has to be negotiations between government/university and each of these organized labour unions in the system.

The Bureaucratic Structures of the University System

In order to put the discussion under the correct perspective, there is the need to highlight howbeit briefly, the bureaucratic structures of the University system so as to bring to the fore its effects on the management of the conflicts within the system. (Wohlgemuth, 1998: 11).

At the head of the arrangements is the University Council which is the highest policy making body of the system. The governance of the University is one of the most sacred responsibilities of the Governing Council. With the exception of the general directive of the Visitor and the Minister of Education, the Council has a general control, superintendence and management of the University. The negative or positive leadership provided by the University Council will affect the tone of the University and send negative or positive signals to the entire University community. The Governing Council is therefore the key organ in the structure of the University system. Its composition is crucial to the efficient functioning of the system. It is by law charged with the general control, superintendence of the policy, finances and property of the University.

Next in the hierarchy of the University’s bureaucratic structure is the University management made up of the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Bursar and the University Librarian, which is headed by the Vice-Chancellor as the leader of the team and is charged with the day-to-day administration of the University. The Vice-Chancellor is the University’s Chief Executive, its academic and administrative head, a member of the Governing Council and the Chairman of Senate. It is generally expected that the Vice-Chancellor would demonstrate the leadership qualities required of a Chief Executive, while taking into account the advice from his advisers in the Committee system or other effective system adopted for the efficient running of the University. Each member of the management team has specific functions in the system that facilitates the performance of the Vice-Chancellor as the Chief Executive. It is important for all members of the management of any University however, to recognize that the good management of the University involves team work and the Vice-Chancellor especially should bear this concept of team work in mind.
Causes of Conflicts in the University System

Much have been said and written about the causes of conflicts in the University system. I only wish to highlight some salient points with a view to establishing the need for moral authority and leadership integrity in the management of conflicts within the system.

The first point to be noted is the rapid expansion of the University system in terms of the numbers of institutions and enrolment of students since the 1960s. The total student enrolment of the first generation Universities in the 1960s was less than 20,000 but by 1994, the enrolment in the over 38 Universities had risen to over 250,000 which in 1999 rose to over 300,000 students (Onokerhoraye, 2000: 3). This rate of expansion is accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of academic, administrative and technical staff employed, as well as the expansion in the number of programmes offered in the institutions.

As a result of the so-called oil boom, it was easy for the Federal Government in 1975 to take over and fund the first generation Universities. Soon afterwards and precisely in the 1980s, revenue from oil dwindled and so as more Universities were established, the government responsibilities multiplied and hence the resources of the Federal Government became overstretched. Therefore, the gap between the demands of Universities for funds and the grants provided became widened.

The obvious decline in funding adversely affected the quality of teaching and research in the Universities and the condition of service of workers in the system. The Universities therefore operate on adverse conditions of overcrowding, deteriorating physical facilities, and lack of resources for non-salary expenditures such as text-books, educational materials, laboratory equipment, consumables and general maintenance.

The problems of under-funding were closely linked with those of campus unrest and consequent closure of the Universities. Conflicts have resulted from cutbacks in government funding of Universities between the University managers and the various unions (Onokerhoraye, 2000:3). The conflicts were heightened by the 1992 ASUU-Federal Government Agreement which led to the fragmentation of the University staff into various unions. A considerable proportion of the time of University management was devoted to clarifying from the National Universities Commission as to which staff are entitled to certain benefits. In attempts to benefit from the agreement, the three unions from the Universities pull in opposite directions, making incompatible demands that tear the University apart.

There are therefore fundamental conflicts in higher education in the globalising era. These conflicts are largely over resource mobilization, the transformation and professionalisation of teaching and research enterprises, professionalisation and use of managerial human resources, adoption and use of information communication technology. There are also conflicts over reform of statutory provisions governing the functions of the University and adoption of new measures for effective and efficient management, renewal of academic programmes and research and also over infrastructural development of these institutions. Problems in higher education are linked to the absence of norms and values, given the lack of codes of ethics in a world controlled by market forces whose operational logic is to allocate power to the powerful, the rich.

Moral Authority and Leadership Integrity and Management of Conflicts in the University System

Social conflicts in educational institutions (Universities inclusive) demand moral authority and leadership integrity to resolve them in this era when interest groups are increasingly becoming aware of their rights as part of the dividends of globalization. The process of defusing antagonism and reaching agreement between parties is what is generally referred to as conflict management.
According to the principle of conflict management, the only true solution to conflict is one that attempts to satisfy the inherent needs of all the parties involved (Aseka, 2001:22). The structure of every legal order directly influences the distribution of power. In a typical human rights language, the academy is a legal order that is entitled to a regime of rights. However, the imposition of bureaucratic structures within the old-fashioned mode of the social organization of production, with its inherent system of authority is responsible for a number of tensions that have intensified and generated various types of conflicts in the academy since the independence era in various African Countries.

In order for conflict management to succeed in the University campus, (Onokerhoraye, 2000) opined that the leadership must display certain leadership characteristics and therefore effective University Administration must:

- Place emphasis on process and outcome;
- Have low fear of failure, and willingness to take risks;
- Nurture the support of strategic constituencies;
- Not immediately succumb to the tyranny of legitimate demands;
- Leave a distinctive imprint;
- Error in favour of over-communication, especially in times of crises;
- Respect the power of organizational cultures; and
- Preserve the highlight sources of opportunity at institutions.

University managers who buy these ideas are obviously prepared for effective management of conflicts in Universities. In the context of Nigerian Universities, one key element in the ability of managers to take control of conflicts is to understand the peculiar characteristics of the University which is under their control. In addition to the unique features of the Universities in general, every Nigerian University has its special features which must be understood by those in charge of its management. No two Nigerian Universities are the same and experience has shown that even people living and working in such Universities. Thus, certain policies and management styles could work in some Universities in the country but fail in others. The first challenge facing managers of Nigerian Universities is to thoroughly study and understand the unique and peculiar features of the Universities which they are called upon to manage.

The politics of University institutional leadership and control therefore directly relates to the politics of state control and its formulation of institutional policy and allocation of national resources, including human resources. There is no question that higher education has long-standing problems in Nigeria despite the transformative purpose of intellectual production in the country. Its development problems can be analyzed from the standpoint of the dialectic domination that defines the state of choice of University leadership instead of relying on a morally-defined framework of meritocracy.

Managing institutions by executive fiat creates and exacerbates conflicts. Such conflicts may lead to divided executive/management along religious, ethnic or gender lines. Many leaders are bogged down in trivial matters because of skills and managerial integrity. Resistance to executive fiat stems from the resentment of exclusion. Resentment is a surge of destructive emotions – grief of anger, fear of anxiety – whenever groups or individuals are marginalized in institutional management.

**CONCLUSION**

There is therefore the need to promote innovation, leadership development and an intellectual enterprise culture in institutions governed by the highest level of moral integrity, ethical standards in management openness and fairness underpinned by a reward and recognition system that is performance driven if the African University and indeed Nigerian University has to be globally competitive (Addae-Mensah, 2001:3)

The intellectual leadership culture must therefore provide room for negotiation. In negotiation, the parties hold conversation to settle their disputes. There must be dialogue; purposive or communicative dialogue must be rethought, reproblematised and deployed.
Unfortunately, some administrators attempt to resolve conflicts through domination. Domination is of course, one of the most destructive elements of social action. It institutes a special case of oppressive power (Webber, 1992:28).

REFERENCES

Wright, O. A. (1942): A Study of War, University of Chicago Press, Chicago