

An Investigation into the Causes of Organizational Conflict in the Zambian Civil Service: A case Study of the Ministry of Health Headquarters

Namwiinga Chilo Hamwanza^{1*} and Michael Dynamite Benson Munkumba²

¹*School of Business Administration, Central University of Nicaragua, Managua, Nicaragua*

²*MIHATCH GROUP, Lusaka, Zambia*

Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate the major causes of organizational conflict in the Zambian Civil Service (ZCS) with the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia as the case study. The paper analyzes the causes of conflict in order to address inefficiencies and ineffectiveness because if not addressed conflict can lead to low productivity, thereby affecting service delivery. The research will add to the existing knowledge on identifying the causes of conflict in organizations. The convenience sample of one hundred was selected from officers in senior supervisor, supervisor and below supervisor positions. However, to determine the causes, the research only continued with ninety-two respondents as eight of them indicated that they were not aware of conflict in the organization. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis. The findings indicated that the major cause of conflict was poor communication. The other causes were role ambiguity, difference in values, poor motivation, lack of recognition, unfair treatment, lack of consultation and lack of respect. This paper recommends that responsible officers should proactively identify conflict and address it before productivity is negatively affected.

Keywords: *Conflict, Causes, Organizational.*

Introduction

Identification of the root causes of a problem allows for design of accurate evidence-driven mitigating strategies. Identifying the causes of conflict was therefore important in order to address them before productivity was affected.

All organizations, be it private or public, are established for the purpose of achieving high levels of productivity in order to survive [1]. For this reason, organizations are expected to exercise efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of their products and services to their clients. However, such an objective may not always be achieved, and this could be associated to, among other things, the conflicts that exist in the organizations [2]. Conflict usually occurs anywhere in the organization where

there is interdependency among functions and levels. Conflict in organizations may arise due to a number of factors. Some of the common causes of conflict in organizations include differences in values, personalities, perceptions, stress and lack of resources [3].

The human relations view of conflict states that conflict is a natural occurrence in all groups and organizations [4]. This implies that Government ministries and departments are not spared from conflict. The existence of conflict in organizations must always be acknowledged no matter how the organization is perceived to be performing [5]. Ignoring conflict can have a negative bearing on the organization performance.

The research attempted to bring to light the major causes of conflict in

organizations using the case study of the Zambian Ministry of Health Headquarters.

Literature Review

Conflict is one of the crucial areas that tend to have a negative impact on productivity of organizations. Conflict in its broad sense can be understood as communication between people who depend on one another and who perceive that the other person or persons stand between them in their realization of their goals, aims or values [6].

Usually, organizational conflict manifests itself in various ways among employees. For this reason, conflict must be first and appropriately addressed so that an organization can efficiently and effectively deliver its services. Conflict can also be defined as “a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected or is about to negatively affect something that the other party cares about” [7]. It has to do with an ongoing activity when an interaction between two parties is deemed to have crossed over so that it becomes an interparty conflict within their hierarchical set up of an organization.

There are three different prominent schools of thought regarding conflict in organizations and these are the *traditional view*, the *human relations view* and *interaction view* [8]. The traditional view of conflict was the most widely held belief, assumes that conflict is bad, that, it is synonymous with such terms as destruction, violence and irrationality, hence should be avoided. The Human Relations view of conflict states that, conflict in organizations were a natural occurrence [9]. This view argues that conflict is a natural event in all groups and organizations. Conflict is something that cannot be avoided, therefore the existence of conflict must be acknowledged and rationalized in such a way that

organizations benefit through improved performance.

The interaction view indicates that, conflict is a necessary component in an organization [9]. This view tends to encourage conflict, on the assumption that cooperative, calm, peaceful, and harmonious groups tend to be static, apathetic, non-aspirational, and not innovative [10]. This school of thought argues that, conflict needs to be maintained at a minimum level on an ongoing basis, so that the group remains viable, self-critical and creative. Some scholars argued that conflict can be positive in work environments, but whenever a critical or major conflict occurs, it should be addressed as the undesired level of conflict can be harmful and dysfunctional for the organization [11].

Conflicts in organizations are caused by a number of factors. Conflict in organizations is a common occurrence, resulting from the differences in employees' personalities and values [12].

Issues of jurisdictional clarity, member goal compatibility and poor leadership styles are some of the factors causing conflict in organizations [13]. If a leader fails to communicate company goals clearly, employees tend to be frustrated and this can lead to conflict [5]. Most of organizations tend to experience conflict where there are differences in opinion between supervisors and their subordinates. These differences in opinions could be compounded by educational background [14]. In his research on “sources of conflicts” [15] discovered that, people have different values and perceive issues differently. When these values, such as respect cannot be reconciled, they result into the formation of subgroups within the organization and eventually creating fertile grounds for conflicts. Where communication is lacking or where the right channels of communication are not

followed, it is possible that conflict will arise [16]. The research by [2] showed that the major causes of organizational conflict was differences in goals, negative perception and poor communication. According to the results, differences in goals was the most important cause of conflict as it scored the highest mean value. Some scholars observed that managers' behavior in dissemination of information is critical in an organization [17]. He argues that, where top managers skip immediate subordinates, tension always exists. The middle management develop a tendency to mistrust managers and usually this result into the formation of out-groups and in-groups where some employees begin to think that others are loved more than them, resulting into "*us versus them*" syndrome.

Conflict in an organization will occur as long as employees compete for jobs, resources, power, recognition and security [18]. When this conflict escalates, the employees frustrate each other in an attempt to achieve their personal objectives. The researchers also argued that, when there is uncertainty from an individual on the task to be done, there will be conflict, especially if they are not explained to by the supervisors or the person in charge. Issues of individual stress were also identified as cause of conflict. The other causes that were identified included role ambiguity, power struggle, differences in personal orientations and pressure.

The study conducted by [3] identified the basic causes of conflicts in organizations as poor communication, mistreatment of employees, inadequate reward system, favoritism and nepotism. The other sources of conflict are lack of adequate resources to share equally and presence of stress as well as sexual harassment.

Subordinates need to be appreciated if they have done the job assigned to them as observed by [19]. He argued that execution

and completion of the task one is allocated is principally determined by the amount of energy or effort one is prepared to expend and thus the supervisor ought to acknowledge that. Failure to acknowledge the expended knowledge and effort will result in to some negative interpretation which eventually provides a fertile environment for conflict to thrive.

Role ambiguity can cause conflict if no efforts are made to correct the situation [5]. Within the structural set up of an organization, there could be conflict when there is lack of clarity as to the precise requirements and the person is not sure on what he or she is expected to do [20]. There must be a clear distinction between the roles that the supervisor is expected to play and those that the subordinate should play [21]. The research showed that the major causes of organizational conflict was differences in goals, negative perception and poor communication. According to the results, differences in goals was the most important cause of conflict as it scored the highest mean value.

Competition for scarce resources does cause a lot of anxiety and frustration between parties, that is, supervisors and subordinates [12]. Organizational conflict occurs sometimes due to scarcity of resources [22]. Individuals and groups have engaged in verbal fights over the limited resources that have been allocated to their workstations [12]. The study conducted by [23] also revealed that the major causes of organization conflict is limited resources and interdependence. Competition among employees takes place in form of promotion, financial, manpower equipment and information resource. It was also revealed that if managers do not formulate plans properly can lead to conflict.

A person's perception of unjust treatment from a supervisor, whether in the application of policies or in rewards and

punishment systems can lead to tension and thereafter conflict [24]. People perceive their remuneration as an indicator of what they are worth to the organization, on the premise that any perceived reduction in remuneration can lead to conflict [25].

The equity theory states that employees compare their efforts and rewards with those of others with similar work situations [26]. Subordinates always want to receive rewards that are at least commensurate with their contribution in an organization and anything short of such expectation is always a potential for conflict.

It is important to acknowledge that people are different. Personalities are genetically and phenotypically determined resulting in different sets of preferred behaviors [12]. Whilst some people may be outgoing, spontaneous and talkative, other people may be introspective, seemingly serious and quiet. Individuals that are highly authoritarian and dogmatic lead to potential conflict [7].

Research Methodology

The research was exploratory in nature because of the limited work that had been done on conflict in the Zambian Civil Service. The Research used inductive approach where data were collected and a theory was developed after data analysis. In order to get in-depth information on conflict, a case study of the Ministry of Health was used. A case study was used because it was not possible to get respondents from all the Government

ministries due to limited financial and human resources. One Hundred (100) respondents were selected using purposive sampling method to participate in the research. Thirty respondents were selected from senior supervisor, 30 from supervisor and 40 from below supervisor positions.

Data Collection Techniques

The research used both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. Self-administered questionnaires with both open and closed ended questions were used to collect qualitative and quantitative data.

Data Collection

The research used both secondary and primary data. Secondary data was obtained from published data sources. This type of data was necessary because it provided the context in which the research topic was understood. Primary data were essentially collected for the purpose of answering the research questions and speak to the research problem. The respondents were subjected to self-administered questionnaires on the understanding that the method would be helpful in meeting the objective of the research as respondents would provide answers based on their individual experiences.

Data Analysis and Results

The following figure 1 shows the outcome of the study on causes of conflict in the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia.

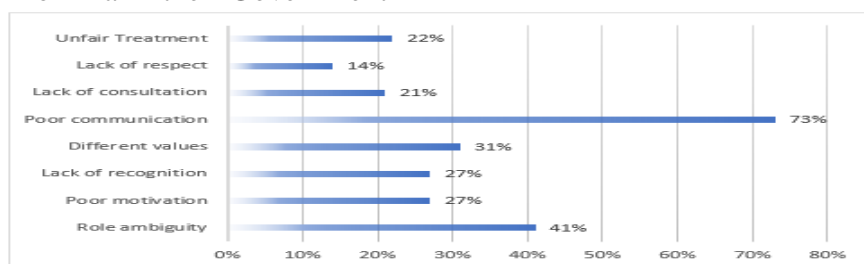


Figure 1. Major Causes of Conflict in the Organization (N = 92)

Source: Author (2024)

When those that admitted that conflict existed in their organizations were asked to mention the causes of the conflict, they observed that poor communication was mostly the cause of conflict with 73 percent of the respondents indicating that. The second highest cause of conflict was observed to be role ambiguity which accounted for 41 percent of responses, followed by difference in values indicated by 31 percent of the respondents. The other

causes of conflict in the organization were poor motivation and lack of recognition accounting for 27 percent of the responses each. These two causes were followed by unfair treatment indicated by 22 percent of the respondents and lack of consultation stated by 21 percent of the respondents. Lack of respect was the least cause of conflict which accounted for 14 percent of the responses.

Table 1. Causes of Conflict in an Organization by Level of Hierarchy

Causes of Conflict	Below Supervisor		Supervisor		Senior Supervisor		Total	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Role Ambiguity	4	28.6	6	42.9	4	28.6	14	15
Poor Motivation	3	30.0	2	20.0	5	50.0	10	11
Lack of Recognition	4	40.0	1	10.0	5	50.0	10	11
Different Values	4	36.4	5	45.5	2	18.2	11	12
Poor Communication	7	25.9	10	37.0	10	37.0	27	29
Lack of Consultation	2	28.6	3	42.9	2	28.6	7	8
Lack of Respect	1	20.0	1	20.0	3	60.0	5	5
Unfair Treatment	3	37.5	1	12.5	4	50.0	8	9
Total	28		29		35		92	100

Source: Author (2024)

An analysis was done on the causes of conflict by level of hierarchy in the organization. Table 1 above shows that of those who said poor communication causes conflict, respondents from supervisor and senior supervisor accounted for 37 percent each, while the remainder 25.9 percent belonged to below supervisor positions. For those who mentioned role ambiguity, 42.9 percent belonged to supervisor positions while those from below supervisor and senior supervisor positions accounted for 28.6 percent each.

About 46 percent of respondents who indicated that difference in values can cause

conflict belonged to supervisor positions, followed by those belonging to positions below supervisor at 36.4 percent while the remainder 18.2 percent were from senior supervisor positions. When considering poor motivation and lack of recognition as causes of conflict, 50 percent of respondents were senior supervisors while thirty (30) and forty (40) percent of the respondents were below supervisors respectively.

Discussion

The research sought to carry out an in-depth investigation into the major causes of

conflicts in the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia. Respondents raised a number of causes of conflict in the organizations. These causes included poor communication, role ambiguity, difference in values, poor motivation, lack of recognition, unfair treatment, lack of consultation and lack of respect. Out of all the causes that were indicated, the crucial ones were poor communication (73%), role ambiguity (41%) difference in values (31), poor motivation (27 %), lack of recognition (27%) unfair treatment (22%) and lack of consultation (21%) and lack of respect (14%).

The research agrees with the findings of [3, 5, 16 and 18] on poor communication being the major cause of conflict in organizations. Some scholars like [19 and 21] also revealed that role ambiguity is one of the causes of conflict in the organizations. The findings are also in agreement with [12] who stated that conflict in organizations is a common occurrence, resulting from the differences in values. Unfair treatment as a cause of conflict in organizations was also stated by [3, 25 and 26].

The summary of the key findings on causes of conflict in the organization were as follows:

Poor Communication

The research findings indicated that poor communication between supervisors and subordinates greatly contribute to the existence of conflict. It was further compounded by the fact that the flow of information between supervisor and subordinate was very inadequate.

Role Ambiguity

Respondents indicated that role ambiguity was contributing to existence of organizational conflict. People tend to overlap in their executing of tasks allocated

to them. Conflict occurred because there was lack of clarity as to what an employee is expected to do.

Difference in Values

Some respondents felt that differences in values led to conflict in the organizations. These include beliefs and personalities. When there are differences in opinion between supervisors and subordinates, conflict occurred.

Poor Motivation

Poor motivation was indicated as the cause of conflict in the Ministry of Health in Zambia. Respondents indicated that they were not motivated. For example, they were not sent for training, others were not given Labor Day awards despite working very hard.

Lack of Recognition

Respondents indicated that one of the causes of conflict in the organization was lack of recognition. Some respondents felt that their efforts were not recognized by the supervisors. Failure to acknowledge the expended effort results into some negative interpretation which eventually leads to fertile environment for conflict.

Unfair Treatment

Conflict in the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia was caused by unfair treatment of subordinates. They stated that supervisors tended to favour some officers.

Lack of Consultation

Lack of consultation was stated as the cause of conflict in the organizations. Employees felt that they needed to be consulted when key decisions are made in the ministry.

Conclusion

Managers must not only be preoccupied with achievement of organizational goals, but must also pay attention to the workers' personal needs. Managers should address the causes of conflict so that the output of workers can remain high and contribute to high productivity in the organization.

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allowed the study to be conducted and to the participants who provided the needed data.

Conflict of Interest

The study was conducted independently by clearly explaining the research questions and objective. Participants also consented to participate in the study. The literature review was wide which included journals, reports, books and Ministry of Health strategic documents.

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