

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

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of organizational conflict in the Zambian Civil Service (ZCS) using Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia as a case study. The paper analyzes the effects of conflict in order to address them and ensure that there is improved performance in the organization. The research will add to the existing knowledge in identifying the effects of conflict in organizations so that necessary measures are put in place to address them.

The sample of one hundred was selected from officers in senior supervisor, supervisor and below supervisor positions using purposive and simple random sampling method. However, eight respondents could not proceed with the study as they indicated that they were not aware of conflict in the organization, hence only ninety-two participated in the study. Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study revealed that the most common effect of conflict in the organization was reduced work productivity. Other effects were reduced morale, low collaboration, increased stress, poor quality of work produced, excessive turn over, absenteeism and increased cost to the institution.

Keywords: Conflict, Effects, Organizational.

Introduction

Conflict exists in organizations resulting in positive and negative effects. Conflict is 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 [1]. 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. According [2] most conflicts have negative connotations, invoke negative feelings and often lead to destruction. Whether the effect of conflict is good or bad depends on the strategies used to address the conflict.

The human relations view of conflict states that conflict is a natural occurrence in all groups and organizations [1]. This theory originated

from the late 1940s. It can therefore be suggested that the problem of organization conflict has been present for as long as organizations have existed. Conflict has preoccupied employees so much that, it has negatively affected their levels of productivity [3]. As a result, there is need to address the effects of conflict in order to achieve organizational objectives. Since conflict has been in existence in organization from time immemorial, it is therefore important that managers are well skilled in conflict theory, research and practice. Ignoring conflict and its effects can have a negative bearing on the organization's performance as productive levels for both individuals, departments and the overall organization reduces [4].

The research attempted to bring to light the most common effects of conflict in

organizations using the case study of the Zambia's Ministry of Health Headquarters.

Literature Review

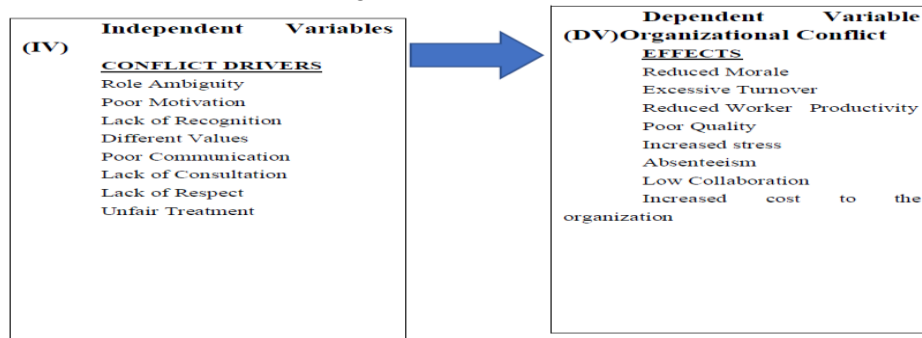
Conflict in organizations is inevitable and must be openly addressed [5]. He further states that, conflict provides a serious challenge when it comes to addressing because it emanates from a number of factors. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing because when it is managed properly, it can lead to potentially positive outcomes [6]. Conflict can be viewed as an aid to incremental improvement in organization design and functioning as well as decision-making process [6].

Scholars, especially in the 21st century have argued that conflict can actually be of immense help to an organization [1] When conflict focuses on tasks, constructive debate can improve decision making and work outcomes [5]. Without such conflict in the organization, there would be little commitment to change and

such a situation would actually render many people stagnant.

Conflict can play a positive role in the life of an organization if properly managed [7]. Conflict can actually stimulate people or rather employees to articulate their views and positions which can lead to greater clarification and understanding of the operation and objectives of the organization [7]. Conflict can greatly assist to make values of an organization more visible, hence making it easier to see the priorities of an organization [8].

As earlier indicated, in any organization there is also the downside of conflict, that is, dysfunctional conflict. Dysfunctional conflict is a kind of confrontation or interaction between parties, in this case, supervisor and subordinate, that presents a negative impact and hinders the achievement of the organizational goals and objectives [9]. Therefore, not all conflicts are bad and not all conflicts are good [10].



Source: Author (2024)

Theoretical Framework

The above diagram shows that, in literature, there are a lot of variables that lead to organizational conflict in organizations. The factors reflected on the left side of the diagram, if not properly addressed, can lead to increased organizational conflict. The diagram further shows the various effects of organizational conflict. Manipulating the independent variables would change the situation and eventually affect the outcome (effects) on the far right.

Effects of Conflict

Conflict is part and parcel of the organization and has led to a number of effects either to the organization or individual employees or both, within the hierarchical set up. Some scholars have researched on the effects of conflict and have identified a number of effects that arise as a result of continuous conflict in organizations which include the following:

Reduced Employee Morale

Organizational conflict reduces the morale of workers, which translates into low productivity and if the organization starts

experiencing reduction in production, the result will be a disastrous reduction in profits or intended results [3]. Good climate at a workplace is critical because it is highly linked to efficiency and effectiveness of an organization or the 'bottom line' in as far as private companies are concerned [11]. Other resources may be there but if the employees' morale is low, the churning of the available resources may not be efficient and effective [5]. Other scholars argued that, conflict if left unaddressed can lead to disinterest [12].

Excessive Employee Turnover

Scholars like [13] argues that members of the organization frustrated with high level of conflicts will exit the organization. This can be detrimental to the organization especially if the members are part of the executive board or heads of committees. When members leave, organizations will have to recruit new members and appoint acting board members and in cases where several members exit, the organization risks dissolution and incur a lot of costs through recruitment [14 and 15].

Reduced Productivity

Conflict can lead to negative behavior resulting in decreased work performance, decline in work interest and job dissatisfaction [16]. Some scholars like [13] also argues that conflict can lead to decreased productivity in organizations. This is so, because where there is conflict, an organization will spend a lot of time addressing conflict, at the expense of concentrating on achieving the core goals of the organization. Further, workers will spend more time on gossiping about conflict or venting their frustrations instead of expending effort to achieve the objectives of the organization [13]. This results in organizational loss of money, donors and access to essential resources (Isa, 2015) [13]. Conflict affects the accomplishment of organizational goals due to organizations attending to stress, hostility and

other undesirable factors when poorly managed [17].

Increased Cost to the Organization

Conflict among employees can be costly to the organization [15]. Organizations incur costs apart from decreasing productivity [14]. The costs can be in form of replacing workers (especially specialized workers) who leave the organization due to conflict. According to [18], the cost to replace a medical surgical nurse who earns \$46,835 annually would be nearly three times the nurse's salary. In addition, it was stated that conflict can result in a hospital's litigation costs. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's 2004 data revealed that about \$168 million was awarded for legal cases of workplace conflict [14].

Increased Stress

Stress is a condition realized by a person when demand surpasses the availability of personal energy or resources [19]. It is a state of mental strain or pressure resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances. While there are many sources of stress, a stressful situation can emerge when a subordinate's relationship with supervisor is riddled with too much conflict [7].

In their study [15] argued that continued conflict results in stressed employees. They stated that interpersonal conflict has been noted as one of the major sources of stress for nurses. Stress has a negative effect on individuals and conflict should be avoided to avert these effects. According to [20] mental health of many individuals and increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression caused by COVID 19 were linked to food insecurity, household violence and alcohol consumption at home.

Reduced Collaboration

In a warm working environment, where the supervisor - subordinate relationship is conducive, members of one institution will always work towards complementing each other [9]. According to [21] bad collaboration

is likely to be caused by, or to result in conflict. This is because interpersonal relationships suffer with conflict, as negative emotions induce poor perceptions of the person who sparked the disagreement. Conflict can create lack of collaboration as effects of conflict can lead to passively avoiding each other to confrontations and venting of emotions. When two parties tend to disagree, they tend to avoid each other and this can reduce collaboration, hence affecting work performance [21].

Reduced Teamwork

Conflict is inevitable when groups of people work together [22]. Intragroup conflict may arise about goals and means of task accomplishment [22]. Intragroup conflict is defined as the degree to which members have real or perceived incompatible goals or interests [23]. There are four types of conflict identified in literature and these are; task, relationship, process and status conflicts [22]. Task conflicts are defined as disagreements about tasks content, while relationship conflicts are defined as interpersonal incompatibilities and tension [23].

Process conflict is defined as disagreements about the logistics of task completion, including roles, responsibilities, and work arrangements [24]. According to [25] status conflict erupts over members' relative positions of respect in the team's social hierarchy. Some scholars like [24] suggested that task conflict could improve team performance. However, task conflict can lead to emotions and thus distract members from the task at hand. According to [26], all forms of team conflict, including task conflict, negatively impacted all forms of team outcomes and performance. Task conflict can therefore lead to reduced team work and ultimately affect performance.

Decreased Customer Satisfaction

According to [27] customer satisfaction is an attitude shaped on the basis of experience after clients acquire a product or use a service and

pay for them. Every organization exists to serve the needs of customers, especially external ones. This particular objective can easily be met if all workers in an institution are expending the energy to provide the best services [11]. Unfortunately, as earlier alluded to, such can only be feasible if conflicts are avoided. Through conflict, productivity and quality suffer which ultimately implies that whatever product or service is produced it falls short of customer expectation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research took an exploratory approach because of inadequate studies conducted on conflict in the Zambian Civil Service. In order to have a broader understanding on conflict, the Zambian Ministry of Health Headquarters was used as a case study. This was also due to limited time in conducting the research as it was not possible to sample all Government Ministries.

Sample Size

The research population was drawn from Ministry of Health Headquarters from top management, middle management and operational level. Such a population cut across different levels from the Heads of Departments to the lowest within the rank and file (office orderlies). This enabled the research to have a good representative from all levels of the organization.

Hundred (100) respondents were selected using purposive sampling method to participate in the Research. From Division 1 (Management), thirty (30) respondents were chosen, another Thirty (30) from division II (Supervisors) and Forty (40) respondents from Division III (Lowest Level).

Data Collection Techniques

The research used both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The self-administered questionnaires with both

open and closed ended questions were used to collect qualitative and quantitative data.

Data Collection

The research used secondary data from published data sources such as books, reports, articles and internet among others. This was necessary because it provided the context in which the research topic was understood. Secondary data also provided an opportunity to

understand the methodology used by previous researchers and avoid duplication.

In addition, primary data were collected for the purpose of answering the research problem and questions. This was through use of self-administered questionnaires.

Data Analysis and Results

The following tables show the outcome of the study on effects of conflict in the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia:

Table 1. Distribution of People Who Believe Conflict has a Bearing on Service Delivery by Level of Hierarchy

Conflict has a Bearing on Service Delivery	Below Supervisor		Supervisor		Senior Supervisor		Total	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Yes	29	87.9	29	100.00	30	100	88	95.6
No	4	12.1	0	0.00	0	0	4	4.4
Total	33	100	29	100	30	100	92	100

Source: Author (2024)

Respondents were asked to give their opinions on the quality of service provided in a work environment affected by conflict. Table 1 above shows that majority comprising 95.6 percent believed that conflict had a bearing on the quality of services provided. Further

analysis of the results showed that all (100 percent) respondents from supervisor and senior supervisor positions believed that conflict had a bearing on the quality of service which was also affirmed by 87.9 percent of respondents below supervisor positions.

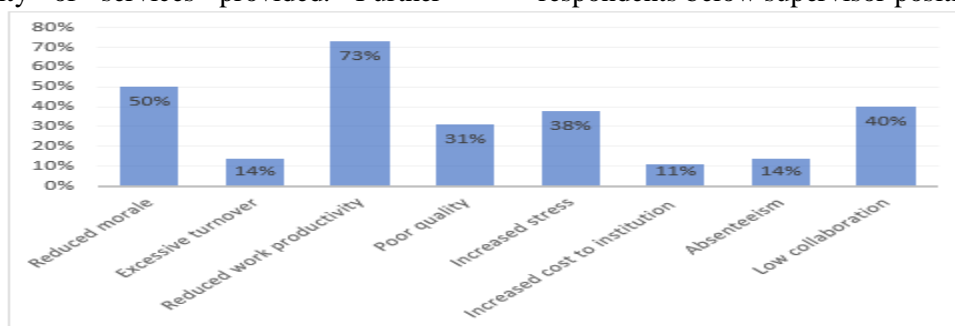


Figure 1. Effects of Conflict in the Ministry/Department (N = 92)

Source: Author (2024)

The figure above shows that the most common effects of conflict at work place was reduced productivity indicated by 73 percent of the respondents. The second effect of conflict was reduced morale indicated by half of the respondents, followed by low collaboration which was stated by 40 percent of the respondents. Increased stress was indicated by 38 percent of the respondents, followed by poor quality mentioned by 31 percent of the

respondents. Other effects of conflict were absenteeism and excessive turn over and each were stated by 14 percent of the respondents. Very few (11 percent) respondents felt that conflict can lead to increased cost to the institution.

Discussion

The research sought to carry out an in-depth investigation into the effects of conflicts in the

Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia. The choice of this topic for the study was important in that service delivery tends to suffer when there is conflict. There is now single mindedness that conflict in organizations is inevitable [7].

The fact that conflict can have both negative and positive impact entails that efforts must be made to understand it. Without addressing this aspect, the image of the organization suffers which can eventually threaten its survival in the long run [5].

The statement of the problem upon which this research was conducted was as that, when there is too much conflict in the organization, efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery to the general public can greatly be affected.

When respondents were asked to identify the effects of conflict in the organization, they indicated a number of effects which included, reduced work productivity, reduced morale, increased stress, poor quality of service, absenteeism, and increased cost to institution. Out of these, it was found that the most common effect was reduced work productivity (73%), followed by reduced morale (50%), low collaboration (40%), increased stress (38%), poor quality of service (31%), excessive turnover (14%), Absenteeism (14%) and increased cost to the institution (11%). The findings agree with [13, 16 and 17] who stated that conflict can lead to reduction in productivity. Further the findings agree with [3 and 12] who identified reduced morale and collaboration as an effect of conflict in organizations respectively. Increased stress as an effect of conflict in organizations was also found by [7 and 15].

The summary of the key findings are as follows:

Reduced Work Productivity

The existence of conflict in the Ministry of Health Headquarters in Zambia has greatly contributed to reduced productivity.

Reduced Morale

Some respondents stated that conflict led to reduced morale in the organization. Good working environment at the work place is critical because it is linked to efficiency and effectiveness of an organization. Workers were frustrated because of the availability of conflict in the Ministry. This resulted into them not putting a lot of effort in their work.

Low Collaboration

Because of conflict in the Ministry of Health Headquarters, there was reduced collaboration. Employees tended not to complement each other because when there is conflict, they avoided each other in order to reduce confrontations and anger.

Increased Stress

Respondents indicated that they were stressed as a result of conflict which was a result of bad relationships with their supervisors.

Poor Quality of Service

The existence of conflict in the civil service has greatly contributed to the poor service delivery to the general public.

Excessive Turnover

Some respondents felt that conflict had led to excessive turnover through resignations and seeking transfers to other Ministries.

Absenteeism

Some respondents justified their preference for absenteeism by stating that they would prefer being at home with their cherished family members to reporting for work only to participate in arguments.

Increased Cost to the Institution

Some respondents indicated that conflict can lead to increased cost to the organization through recruitment, to replace those employees who leave the organization due to conflict.

Conclusion

Supervisors should ensure that they address both organizational and employees' needs to ensure increased productivity in the organization. It is thus crucial that the highlighted effects are given attention so that there is effective service delivery in the Ministry of Health Headquarters.

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Conflict of Interest

The study was very independent as participants willingly accepted to answer the research questionnaires after the objective of the study was explained.

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