Conflict Management of Diplomats and Consular Staff at the Kenyan Embassy in the United States of America

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Abstract: The study focused on the challenges of workplace conflict affecting performance of diplomats and consular staff at the Kenyan Embassy in the United States of America. In formulating the statement of the problem, the researcher addressed the question of resolving challenges of workplace conflict that affect performance of diplomats and consular staff in the United States of America. The ideal expectation was that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to meet its targets as set by the Government of Kenya. The real situation that existed was that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not meet the set targets. The problem was that employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had not performed to their optimum in order to realize set goals. Under-performance formed the gap. It was this gap that the researcher set out to fill.

Keywords: Managing Conflict affecting performance of Kenyan Diplomats and Consular staff in the United States of America.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. Conflict is an emotionally loaded subject. While it may conjure up images of large-scale struggles between unions and management, it is an ever-present feature of organizational life at all levels and pervades much of what we do irrespective of our function, role or status in the organization. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting. Many conflicts arise from differences in role and status. Role differences between departments, as well as between levels or sub-sections of an organization, can also be a cause of both real and apparent conflict. Lack of a clear distribution between technology of the firm and human capital and the limited control of employment contracts offered to employees can cause conflict. Conflict is an ever-present phenomenon in every organization, but it can be managed in such a way that its effects are less destructive. After all, most union complaints and disputes result in settlements with management which do not threaten the survival of the organization, even though interests of employees do not coincide with the priorities set by their bosses. Conflict is usually managed and resolved through well-established processes and mechanisms. Only when these mechanisms fail do the results of conflict, such as strikes or legal action, hit the headlines.

In any situation involving more than one person, conflict can arise. The causes of conflict range from philosophical differences and divergent goals to power imbalances. Unmanaged or poorly managed conflicts generate a breakdown in trust and lost productivity. For small businesses, where success often hinges on the cohesion of a few people, loss of trust and productivity can signal the death of the business. With a basic understanding of the five conflict management strategies, small business owners can better deal with conflicts before they escalate beyond repair.

Often workers are used to a certain management style. When new rules and regulations are introduced there is bound to be resistance from the workers at least at the initial stages. This constitutes conflicts. Lack of clear goals in customer service, low respect for colleagues, and poor evaluation of others work results in conflict. Destructive conflict is unpleasant- unpleasant working environment erode worker morale, output and customer satisfaction. Conflict lowers job satisfaction among workers. Conflict cannot be resolved unless it is addressed. This study set out to resolve workplace conflict affecting performance of diplomats and consular staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Conflict is inevitable in workplace settings, and conflicts can arise between co-workers, supervisors, and subordinates. This was in the findings of the study. Conflict is a sign of a need for change and an opportunity for growth, new understanding and improved communication.

2. WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict can be defined as a relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have or think they have incompatible goals. Conflicts are a fact of life, inevitable and often creative (Scott, 1990).[1]. From the micro, interpersonal level through to groups, organizations, communities and nations, all human relations – social relations, economic relations and relations of power – experience growth, change and conflict (Weihrich, 2005).[2]. Conflict is introduced or brought into the open so that necessary change can be brought about (Canadian Working Paper 1, 1998).[3].

Conflict is inevitable in organizations because they function by means of adjustment and compromises among competitive elements in their structure (Armstrong 2008).[4]. Conflict also arises when there is change, because it may be seen as a threat to be challenged or resisted, or when there is frustration this may produce an aggressive reaction. Conflict is an inevitable result of progress and change and it can and should be used constructively (Armstrong 2008).[5]. Conflict between individuals raises fewer problems than conflict between groups (Armstrong 2008).[6]. Individuals can act independently and resolve their differences. Members of groups may have to accept the norms, goals and values of their groups. The individual's loyalty will usually be to his or her own group if it is in conflict with others.

Organizational conflict is a part of organizational life and may occur within the individual, between individuals, between individuals and groups (Weihrich *et al*, 2005).[7] In the case of this study, the researcher found conflict between individuals and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Conflict can be very beneficial as it may cause an issue to be presented in different perspectives (Weihrich *et al,* 2005).[8]. Conflict in an office setting is a result of scarce resources. Scarce resources may include office space, supplies, the boss's time or attention. We all require resources to perform and when they are not forthcoming; there is frustration, anger, stress and aggression directed at those we perceive as blocking us

Conflict that exists between sales and production in many companies is only one example of the inherent nature of conflict in organizations (Wellin 1995).[9]. In this case, the conflict is due to the very different perspectives of the two functions. While sales tends to be predominantly outward looking towards the customer, production tends to be inward looking towards maximizing the use of existing resources (Wellin 1995).[10]. Conflict also characterizes the relationship of an organization with its environment.

Relations with the community and government officials also frequently involve conflict. While the community may attempt to impose certain standards such as pollution control and equal opportunity of employment, a Ministry may often attempt to evade these requirements so that they interfere as little as possible with the achievement of organizational objectives and values. The relationships within departments are also characterized by conflict. Different departments in a Ministry pursue different and sometimes opposing objectives. While the Human Resource department may want to run a particular management development programme, Finance may put on pressure to curtail all but the most vital forms of expenditure. Conflict abounds within departments, between bosses and subordinates, and between peers who are competing for the same scarce resources (Wellin 1985).[11].

Most conflict has its roots in some difference of attitude or goals between the parties involved. As conflict develops, the parties involved tend to view their antagonists in a different light. Instead of confining conflict to the issues in dispute, opponents are viewed in a totally negative light and attribute hostile motives to them. This process develops until the original issues are forgotten and concentration is on the all-embracing nastiness of the other party. It reaches a point when the real situation is no longer important but it is used as a weapon against the opponent. Conflict is crucial when an attempt is made to overcome differences in objectives, intentions and goals. However, apparent conflict is not based on

real differences between objectives, but on attitudes people have towards one another which are largely attributable to subjective perception (Willen 1985).[12].

3. CLARIFYING CONFUSION ABOUT CONFLICT

Conflict occurs with two or more people who, despite their first attempts at agreement, do not yet have agreement on a course of action, usually because their values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature. Conflict can occur:

i) Within yourself when you are not living according to your values.

ii) When your values and perspectives are threatened.

iii) When there is discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment.

Conflict is inevitable and often necessary when forming high-performing teams because they evolve through "form, storm, norm and perform" periods. Getting the most out of diversity often means addressing contradictory values, perspectives and opinions. Conflict is often needed. It:

• Helps to raise and address problems.

• Energizes work to be focused on the most important priorities.

• Helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences.

Conflict is not the same as discomfort. The conflict is not the problem – poor management of the conflict is the problem. Conflict is a problem when it:

• Hampers productivity.

• Lowers morale.

• Causes more and continued conflicts.

• Causes inappropriate behaviors(Rahim 2002).[13].

4. CAUSES OF CONFLICT

There are several causes of conflict. Conflict may occur when:

• A party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests.

• A party holds behavioral preferences, the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preferences.

• A party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of all parties involved may not be satisfied fully.

• A party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behavior but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s).(DeChurch 2001).[14].

• Two parties have partially exclusive behavioral preferences regarding their joint actions.

• Two parties are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities.

5. FINDINGS BY THE RESEARCHER REGARDING TYPES OF MANAGERIAL ACTIONS THAT CAUSE WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

(a). Poor communications:

• Employees at the Embassy experience continual surprises, for example, they are not informed of major decisions that affect their workplaces and lives.

• Employees do not understand the reasons for the decisions – they are not involved in the decision-making.

- As a result, they trust the "rumor mill" more than their management.

(b). The alignment or the amount of resources is insufficient. There is:

- Disagreement about job descriptions.

- Stress from working with inadequate resources.

(c). Leadership problems:

These include:

- Avoiding conflict, passing the buck with little follow-through on decisions.

- Supervisors do not understand the jobs of their subordinates.

- There are many potential sources of conflict. In this study, the findings show that there were a number of areas that caused conflict. Among these were social and cultural differences that led to breakdown in communication and subsequent misunderstandings. This answers objective one; conflict in teams – when individuals do not contribute their fair share of work as they do not understand the objectives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (objective two); conflict between employees in staff positions as they did not understand their roles and responsibilities (objective three); competing for limited resources (objective four on work place environment); lack of communication was an area where conflict was manifested.

- Conflicts, both interpersonal and inter-team are a problem. When employees with different social experiences, personalities, needs and points of view interact with co-workers, disagreements may occur.

- If there was no conflict, the researcher would not have initiated this study, hence the results she found would not have come to the fore. Poor communication can be a hindrance to achievement of organization goals especially when juniors frustrate the management. This can cause dissatisfaction with management.

- Scarce resources: resources may include office space, supplies, the boss's time or attention. We all require resources to perform and when they are not forthcoming, there is frustration, anger, stress and aggression directed at those we perceive as blocking us.

6.   MANAGING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Since conflict is unavoidable we must learn to manage it. The majority of employment conflicts no longer conform to the labour versus management dichotomy anticipated by labour and employment law. Instead, conflict takes a variety of subtle, suppressed, and overt forms that, if not managed and resolved effectively, imposes significant personal and organizational costs on those involved (Ulrich et al 1997).[15]. Globalization increases diversity of the workforce along a number of personal dimensions and thereby further raises the potential for workplace conflict.

Conflict Priorities:

When individuals make their own plans, they have to balance different priorities and may have to make some difficult decisions. It is likely that individuals will experience conflicts between the following areas of priority:

- Work: the task has to be completed and done to a certain standard by a particular time and so the work is a priority consideration.

- Money comprises a part of the resources available and it is important how this is used.

- The people with whom an individual works and the individual comes into contact with.

However, these three areas could work in conflict as seen hereunder:

Prioritizing Conflicts:

A. A conflict between work and money.

The Human Resource manager has told me to train line managers in personnel record keeping, but she/he has not offered to pay for this training and its cost will take me over my annual budget.

B. A conflict between work and people.

No one wants to work the Saturday morning shift, but it is a job which has to be carried out and got on with.

C. A conflict between money and people.

I would love to be able to provide mobile phones for all my team members in order to make life easier for them, but I do not have the resources.

Conflict of Interest:

Conflict of interest can occur when two spouses work in the same organization. Typically, to reduce the potential of conflict of interest, one cannot supervise the other (Bruce et al 1991).[17].

Conflicts, both interpersonal and inter-team, are a problem in an office setting. When employees with different social experiences, personalities, needs and points of view interact with co-workes, disagreements may cause stress (Bratton et al 2003).

Working couples and work-family conflict:

A working couple is any two people in an ongoing, committed relationship, where both partners work and where decisions (family and work) are influenced by the working situation of each partner.

Working couples are more likely to experience work-family conflict in which only one partner works (Swanepoel et al 2001).[18]. Three types of work-family conflict are appended herebelow:

-   Time-based conflict which develops when time that is devoted to one role cannot be devoted to another. Time-based conflict occurs when time pressures in one role makes it impossible to satisfy the expectations of the other role. Inflexible work schedules, excessive overtime and work involvement are related to work-family conflict.

-   Strain-based conflict that occurs when performance in one role is adversely affected by the stress that is experienced in another. For example, a crisis in the family causes fatigue that results in poor performance at work.

-   Behaviour-based conflict which occurs when some patterns of role behavior are in conflict with expectations of behavior in other roles. An example is one male manager who is expected to be self-reliant, emotionally stable, and somewhat aggressive at work, yet his family expects him to be warm and caring.

Conflict between work and family roles are created by some of the following work-related factors:

-   Some members of staff work more hours than is the norm

-   There is lack of control over decision to work overtime

-   There is an inflexible work schedule

-   Irregular starting time

-   Psychologically demanding work

7. THE FIVE CONFLICT STRATEGIES

These are as follows:

Accommodating:

The accommodating strategy essentially entails giving the opposing side what it wants. The use of accommodation often occurs when one of the parties wishes to keep the peace or perceives the issue as minor. For example, a business that requires formal dress may institute a "casual Friday" policy as a low-stakes means of keeping the peace with the rank and file. Employees who use accommodation as a primary conflict management strategy, however, may keep track and develop resentment.

Avoiding:

The avoidance strategy seeks to put off conflict indefinitely. By delaying or ignoring the conflict, the avoider hopes the problem resolves itself without a confrontation. Those who actively avoid conflict frequently have low esteem or hold a position of low power. In some circumstances, avoiding can serve as a profitable conflict management strategy, such as after the dismissal of a popular but unproductive employee. The hiring of a more productive replacement for the position soothes much of the conflict

Collaborating:

Collaboration works by integrating ideas set out by multiple people. The object is to find a creative solution acceptable to everyone. Collaboration, though useful, calls for a significant time commitment not appropriate to all conflicts. For example, a business owner should work collaboratively with the manager to establish policies, but collaborative decision-making regarding office supplies wastes time better spent on other activities.

Compromising:

The compromising strategy typically calls for both sides of a conflict to give up elements of their position in order to establish an acceptable, if not agreeable, solution. This strategy prevails most often in conflicts where the parties hold approximately equivalent power. Business owners frequently employ compromise during contract negotiations with other businesses when each party stands to lose something valuable, such as a customer or necessary service.

Competing:

Competition operates as a zero-sum game, in which one side wins and other loses. Highly assertive personalities often fall back on competition as a conflict management strategy. The competitive strategy works best in a limited number of conflicts, such as emergency situations. In general, business owners benefit from holding the competitive strategy in reserve for crisis situations and decisions that generate ill-will, such as pay cuts or layoffs (Rahim 2001).[19].

8.   METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Methods of conflict resolution include re-defining jobs, creating a new pay system, and holding feedback surveys (Fombrun et al 1984).[20]. Some of the ways to resolve conflicts include achieving control through consent rather than force (Fombrun et al 1984).[21]. Attempts to get both parties to see the similarities and differences that exist between them and look for ways to overcome the differences. This is conflict resolution (Decenzo et al 2002).[22]. In conflict resolution, achieving some movement toward reducing these differences is often gained through consensus building, or finding a solution that is acceptable to both parties (Decenzo et al 2002)[23]..

Conflict resolution addresses the causes of conflict and seeks to build new and lasting relationships between groups, in this case the employer and employees. Conflict is usually based upon a difference of goals, objectives or expectations between individual and groups. Since conflict is unavoidable we must learn to manage it. We face conflicts with people who think and act differently or in ways that are different from our values/beliefs. It is normal for people to disagree, but it is important to resolve these conflicts in a constructive way.

One overriding factor which influences whether parties in conflict can resolve their differences is their overall approach to conflict. If parties in conflict believe they can only achieve their objectives at the expense of the other party, their implicit approach is that they can win only if the other side loses. This approach is referred to as a "win/lose" strategy. Alternatively, if the parties believe that they are most likely to achieve their own objectives if the also achieves something, their implicit approach is one of collaborating. This is called a "win/win' strategy (Willen 1985).[24].

Often workers are used to a certain management style. When new rules and regulations are introduced there is bound to be resistance from the workers at least at the initial stages. This constitutes conflicts. Lack of clear goals in customer service, low respect for colleagues, and poor evaluation of others work results in conflict. Destructive conflict is unpleasant-unpleasant working environment erode worker morale, output and customer satisfaction. Conflict lowers job satisfaction among workers. Conflict cannot be resolved unless it is addressed. This study set out to resolve workplace conflict affecting performance of diplomats and consular staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

9.   BENEFITS OF CONFLICT

The most immediate benefit is that it can help to re-adjust the relationship of the parties concerned. Although there may have been a direct conflict when employees are competing for resources, this situation will change when one of them is promoted up the organizational pyramid. Conflict is likely to take a different form when the former colleague raises issues and problems with the newly promoted superior (Willen 1985).[25].

Another benefit of conflict is as a safety valve (DeChurch et al 2001).[26]. Efforts can lead to the build-up of frustration and tension, especially if we do not achieve our goals. Conflict with another individual or group can act as an outlet for this tension and so prevent it from contaminating everything else we do. This is particularly noticeable in union – management negotiations, when each side may go through a phase of expressing totally negative feelings about the other (Willen 1985).[27]. So long as this expression is controlled and each party tolerates the other's outburst to hear and react, the resulting hostility can create a considerable set-back for the ultimate achievement of an outcome which is satisfactory to both sides (Follet 1940).[28].

10.   HOW TO MANAGE A CONFLICT WITH ANOTHER PERSON

i). Know what you do not like about yourself:

- We often do not like in others what we do not want to see in ourselves.
- Write down 5 traits that really bug you when see them in others.

ii). Manage yourself. Stay calm:

- Speak to the person as if the other person is not upset – this can be very effective!
- Nod your head to assure the person that you heard him/her.
- Maintain eye contact with the person.

iii). Hold the discussion in a private area:

- Many times, moving to a new environment invites both of you to see or feel differently.

iv). Give the other person time to vent:

- Do not interrupt the person or judge what he/she is saying.

v). Verify that you are accurately hearing each other. When the other person is done speaking:

- Ask the person to let you rephrase (uninterrupted) what you are hearing to ensure you are hearing it correctly.
- To understand the person more, ask open-ended questions (Rahim 2002).

vi). Repeat the above step, for the other to verify that he/she is hearing you. Describe your perspective:

- Use "I", not "you."
- Talk in terms of the present as much as possible.
- Quickly mention your feelings.

vii). Acknowledge where you disagree and where you agree:

- One of the most powerful means to resolve conflict is to mention where you both agree.

viii).Discuss the matter on which you disagree:

- Ask "What can we do to fix the problem?" The person might begin to complain again.
- Then ask the same question. Focus on actions you both can do.
- Ask the other person if they will support the action(s).

- If the person will not, then ask for some more time.

ix). Thank the person for working with you:

- It takes patience for a person to engage in meaningful conversation during conflict. Acknowledge and thank the other person for his/her effort.

x). If the situation remains a conflict, then:

- Conclude if the other person's behavior violates one of the personnel policies and procedures in the workplace and if it does, then follow the policy's terms for addressing that violation.

- Otherwise, consider whether to agree to disagree.

- Consider seeking a third party to mediate (Rahim 2002).[29].

11. RECOMMENDATIONS IN RESOLVING CONFLICT

In order to improve on the performance of diplomats and consular staff in the United States of America and avert conflict, the following will have to be put in place:

■ Objective one: The Ministry should prepare its staff being sent to the USA regarding cultural shock and weather, among other challenges. Its Human Resource Department (HRD) should review individual work plans and get involved in setting targets for the diplomats and consular staff in respect of their performance appraisal.

■ Objective Two – MFA should give these employees proper job descriptions to avoid conflict.

■ Objective Three – MFA should sensitize these employees regarding MFAs Strategic Plan as well. Conflict will be avoided when staff are in the know.

■ Objective Four – MFA should improve the working environment of these employees, as well as addressing conflict in competing for resources, and

■ Objective Five – MFA should ensure that not one channel of communication takes advantage of the other by using the ones available equitably. Effective communication will ensure that there is no conflict.

■ For Kenya to realize its economic development through its human capital in the USA, it has to take care of their expectations. This will improve their performance.

In order to resolve conflict at the Embassy, the following action balance family and work needs to be looked considered:

- More organizational sensitivity for home life

- The introduction of flexible benefits to assist the diplomats and consular staff with family needs such as child care and the care of sick children.

- The introduction of flexible work hours and work-at home programmes

- The revision of relocation policies to make provision for the needs of a modern worker.

- The introduction of alternative career paths – not all employees at the Embassy can become the Ambassador.

Senior Officers at the Embassy should regularly review job descriptions to ensure that job roles do not conflict. They should also build relationships with all subordinates. They can do this by meeting at least once a month alone with them in office and asking about their accomplishments, challenges and any other issues they may be facing. There should be basic training in interpersonal communications, conflict management and delegation. Train employees about the procedures.

Consideration should be made to have an anonymous suggestion box in which employees can provide suggestions. This can be a powerful means to collect honest feedback.

To enhance the performance of diplomats and consular staff in the USA, issues that came out have to be addressed. The politicization of the recruitment process creates a lot of concern about filling of a growing percentage of senior posts;

because recruitment is done from outside, this has an adverse effect on the advancement prospects of the existing staff. The negative effects resulting from these shortcomings are numerous and wide-ranging. Recruitment procedures have remained primitive. Indeed, it would be preferable if the Minister and Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs were to recruit talented people from the universities or from the private and public sectors on fixed-term appointments. Management through the Human Resource Department should organize for job rotations and re-design jobs within the workforce to reduce routine and repetitive kind of work among the civil servants. This was found to be the cause of reduced output of civil servants in the United States of America. The Human Resource Department (HRD) should review individual work plans and get involved in setting targets for diplomats and consular staff in respect of their performance appraisal.

It can be concluded that the study met its main objective of investigating factors affecting performance of civil servants in the USA and the study has come up with the above suggested recommendations.

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