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## MEANING, NATURE AND SCOPE OF CONFLICT IN NIGERIAN WORKPLACES

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### ABSTRACT

Conflict is a pervasive reality which resonates and occurs globally in diverse forms. UNDP (2014) noted that conflict and a sense of personal insecurity have pervasive adverse impacts on human development and leave billions of people living in precarious conditions. Conflicts have short and long term impacts which affect both conflicting and non-conflicting parties in different ways. This is most poignant at work, where workplace conflicts can escalate, inflict enormous harm on firms, employers, managers, employees, unions etc and pose a great threat to societal as well as national stability and progress. Hence, it becomes expedient for stakeholders at work to promptly and amicably settle conflicts whenever it erupts. It is against this backdrop that this paper calls for synergy between workplace parties and institution in developing accessible and transparent mechanisms for resolving workplace conflicts in Nigeria, given the complexities of our economy and low industrial capacity utilization in private and public enterprises.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Workers, Employers, Workplace, Nigeria

### CONFLICT

The world has become less peaceful every year since 2008, highlighting the importance of better understanding conflict and violence risk (GP1 2014). In affirming this, UNDP (2014) noted that more than 1.5 billion people live in countries affected by conflict— about a fifth of the world's population. Conflict has been said to be innate in human nature and a distinguishing feature of human socialization processes. It has also been identified as a vital ingredient in attaining development and highlighted as a permanent fixture in human interactions and existence. According to Withers and Wisinski, (2007), conflict is an inevitable part of our working lives, although it may not occur on a daily basis, when it happens it can be overwhelming. This is normal, natural and sometimes necessary for continued growth and development. Anywhere that there are more than two people, there is bound to be conflict. This is because people are inherently different, that is, in terms of interests, orientation and background. Conflict occurs when these differences come to light. Workplace conflicts are a clash of interests and resultant disputes of varying intensity between workplace actors such as trade unions and employers associations. It revolves around sharing the gains of work; incompatibility of goals, interests and values; and attempt to control or dictate the direction of things or policies in the workplace. It is of immense socio-economic and political import for workplace parties. This is in line with the stand of Coser (1956) that conflict too has to do with a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals. Ingram (2016) opined that conflict is inevitable in workplace settings, and conflicts can arise between co-workers, supervisors and subordinates or between employees and external stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers and regulatory

agencies. Conflicts may also take the form of disagreements that emerge when goals, interests or values of workplace parties are incompatible and parties try to thwart each other's efforts to achieve their objectives. Weber (1949) pointed out that conflict is part of social life, meaning that conflict is normal, essential and accepted as part of man's daily endeavors.

#### TYPES OF WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

Conflicts are a key element of human and organisational interactions at work. However, the two parties despite being partners in progress and joint key players in the workplace schema may have partly congruent and partly divergent interests. The interactions between , among and within these parties over employment and other work related matters could produce both agreements and disagreements, generate tensions, opposing viewpoints and contradictory stands which could set the stage for the eruption of conflicts. Conflicts are very frequent occurrences in Nigerian industries (Yesufu, 2000; Fagbemi, 2004; Obono, 2007; ILO, 2009; Onyejeli, 2011; Akinwale, 2011). In the Nigerian workplace, there are three major types of conflicts, management-union, union-union and management-worker conflicts respectively. These conflicts are caused by diverse factors. In connection with this, Ojeifo (2000) noted that in many organisations in Nigeria, internal (intrapersonal) and interpersonal conflicts are consuming so much organisational time and attention that organisations are starting to look as though conflict is their primary business.

Allowing conflict to fester in workplaces often creates net negative effects and lose-lose outcomes especially in a nation with low capacity utilization and productivity like Nigeria. A theoretical framework that can be utilized to expound on workplace conflicts is John Burton's human needs theory. Burton (1990) was of the opinion that in analyzing conflicts, one must be able to identify and separate interests, values and needs. For instance, workers' needs are quite different from the desires of employers, so also the values and interests of workplace parties are poles apart. Withers and Wisinki,(2007) expounded that we can divide most of what people fight over at work into three general categories. Two of these three categories are: not enough to go around and goals that workers want to reach. They claimed further that most often at work, conflicts seem to be about resources, turf boundaries, or conflicting goals. The definition by Tillett and French (2007) that conflicts occur when one or more employees or groups perceive their values or needs to be incompatible with others or the organisation is quite applicable in this sphere. The reward systems, management style and nature of work in Nigerian organisations are prone to manifest conflict.

The type of conflict that occurs between trade unions is commonly referred to as inter-union disputes. This occurs mostly as a result of overlapping jurisdictions, in which case two or more unions may make membership claims within the same organisation and sector. Also, the tussle for superiority in the workplace may enhance this kind of conflict. An example is what happens in the Nigerian Universities between the two key unions, the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU). Another example can be found in Hospitals between the various professional groups.

The second type is intra-union conflicts. This basically occurs between and among members of the same union. For example, conflict between or among elected or appointed officials and even ordinary members over the control of power, policy disagreements and utilization of funds. Ojeli (1977) stated that the causes of industrial conflict in Nigeria is the lukewarm attitude of employers and government in responding to the demands of the workers or treating their demand with levity; and also, non-recognition of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) as an

organ for harmonizing possible conflicts between the employers of labor and employees. Non-implementation of valid agreements, impugning and/or abnegation of workers' rights could also lead to crisis in the workplace, especially when the employers have a pedigree of constantly violating workers' rights and denying them of their entitlements.

#### MEANING OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

People naturally approach the settlement of conflict in diverse ways depending on dynamics, peculiarities, abilities and skills of the representatives of each of the conflicting parties; past experiences of parties; willingness and commitment of parties to reach resolutions; the position of the law; and the expectations of all other stakeholders. In as much as conflicts in the workplace are natural occurrences and unavoidable phenomenon, Tillett and French (2007) noted that in managing conflict in organisations, it is important to identify the underlying cause(s) rather than accept events or issues at face value. This is because, conflicts mean very different things to different people. It may also be hinged on the type of profession, sector or industry.

Withers and Wisinski, (2007) pointed out that when handled effectively, conflict can help people meet their goals and objectives within teams or departments in an organisation. However in order not to capsize the organisational ship, it is very important for unions and employers to deploy conflict management techniques that would reduce the tendencies to conflict, diminish the span of conflicts with crippling effects, divert the energies in conflict towards mutually beneficial outcomes and improve synergy between the parties to avoid preference for conflict. Conflict management connotes systematic, organized, orderly and methodical approach to stop or reduce the effect of conflicts.

Efficient handling of conflicts presupposes that the workplace relationship is naturally conflict prone. Workers and employers have different views on how the workplace relationship and issues should be handled. To many Nigerian workers and their representatives, management should improve the social, economic and political benefits workers derive from work. Workers desire enterprises where their emoluments are jointly decided, taking cognizance of the state of the economy, industry-wide benchmarks and principles of fairness and equity. Also, conflicts would occur less in organisations where employees are well paid, mentored, challenged, promoted, involved, appreciated, valued, empowered and trusted. Conflicts can be palliated by more understanding and empathy on the part of the workplace parties. McCabe and Rabil (2001) enthused that conflict management systems have been described as providing for workplace justice.

#### NATURE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management is an ongoing, continuous and never ending exercise to cope with, and rein in conflict. Ingram (2016) pointed out that managing conflict is a key management competency and all small business owners should study and practice effective conflict management skills to maintain a positive workplace environment. Conflicting parties should be involved in all conflict management efforts for it to be effective. Others such as regulatory institutions or the appropriate agencies of the state may be peripherally involved. Relationships between owners and workers, owners and workers' groups, managers and the managed, state and workers and owners and state in Nigeria are prone to diverse forms of constant conflicts because of our peculiar nature, varied and dissimilar interests, values, perceptions, norms, desires, and ideologies.

On one side of the divide are the managers who are the representatives of the owners and are responsible for the day to day running of the enterprise , while on the other side are workers and their representatives who are legitimately elected members of the workers' unions. The Government is expected to be an unbiased umpire and impartial arbiter to guarantee that the rights and interests of the parties are negotiated in atmospheres devoid of intimidation and typified by freedom. Society gains most when conflicts in organisations are immediately addressed. In the Nigerian context, workers and their representatives feel that the state is usually on the side of the employers instead of being neutral. They have the mindset that the actions, statements and policy directions of Government does not portray it as the objective party that it should be. The tough economic terrain within which organisations in Nigeria operate creates a fertile ground for conflicts and strike actions which bode ill for the nation's nascent democracy and tottering economy. Iche (2016) asserted that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) may cut jobs as part of cost-saving measures as a result of the prevailing economic situation in Nigeria. With this comes the inability to adequately pay off disengagement benefits leading to conflicts. This is a potential danger currently facing Nigerian firms.

Shagwert (2011) emphasized that the essence of labor movement is: workers organizing themselves and getting together with their communities to identify some real injustices that are systemic throughout the country. Hence, the rights of workers represented by unions to collectively bargain with employers' representatives in fulfillment of the workers' right to belong to groups that best protect their personal interest should be given effect at all levels of industry to promote peace and harmonious conditions that are germane for the purpose of advancing national development. According to Wright (2011), recent studies point to the positive role played by unions in helping to resolve workplace disputes. Autonomy from management and the availability of effective dispute resolution skills and expertise puts union representatives in pole position to peacefully resolve workplace conflicts. When workers unionize and are strengthened by laws and institutional frameworks for the purpose of furthering peace and enhancing conditions necessary for lasting prosperity for all, engagements between the independent representatives of the workers and employers to reach consensus for common growth and mutually beneficial improvements would increase commitment and enhance contributions needed for enhanced workplace performance for the common good of all parties. Nigeria's case is exacerbated by its low ranking of 5 on the 2015 ITUC Global Rights Index as one of the worst countries for workers rights. Countries with the rating of 5 are the worst countries in the world to work in. While the legislation may spell out certain rights, workers have effectively no access to these rights and are therefore exposed to autocratic regimes and unfair labour practices.

#### SCOPE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The scope of conflict management can be based also on analysis of the parties involved. Nigerian workplaces have their value system through which priorities are determined. When different priorities collide, conflict is often the result. How we engage these differences becomes critically important (Withers and Wisinki, 2007). Conflict management could entail engagement of parties at the bipartite or the tripartite level. The principle of tripartism which is the system of Industrial Relations in Nigeria specifies the equality of the three stakeholders, but conceptually and even in practice, the argument of engagement of equals does not hold water. This is because the Nigerian government as one of the biggest employers of labour in Nigeria, the manager of the national economy and the apex political institution, often calls the shots. Clarent and Davis (2005) advocated for collaborative conflict management which is concerned with conflict at the group or organisational level. It depends upon the willingness of employees at the workplace to

work collaboratively to resolve differences and can include a third party facilitator. Against the backdrop of pervasive and diverse conflicts in the world of work, responsive and strategic union leaders and employers/management are expected to be proactive advocates of cooperatism and conflict management in the workplace; optimum developers of workers and employers through entrenching positive work attitudes and skills that will reduce the propensity for conflicts to the barest minimum; willing users of positive conflict management steps and positive negotiators for union and organisational progress; and exemplary in values, results-driven, ethics-based proactive leaders with the continued existence of the organisation as their salient concern through partnership and cooperation with employers and workers respectively.

## CONCLUSION

Inarguably, conflict is inevitable in Nigerian organisations, but its proper management for mutually beneficial outcomes can make it constructive. To achieve this, the Labour Movement, Nigerian Government and Nigerian Employers Consultative Association should seek to engage in result-oriented negotiations and dialogues that can guarantee win-win outcomes for all. Mutually formulated workplace conflict prevention strategies which are focal to increasing organisational performance should be the main agenda for trade unions and employers. In this era of heightened competitiveness among organisations, it has become essential for organized labour to work with the organized private sector to identify and inculcate values, attitudes and ideals that can evolve and sustain good work ethics and a culture of partnership to ameliorate workplace conflicts. The quest for organisational effectiveness in this present age and the unknown future begins with a personal commitment by workers, their employers and their representatives to display positive work attitudes and create an environment that can promote cordial labour-management relations and practices. Finally, with respect to the larger society, UNDP (2014) opined that the presence of responsive and accountable institutions of governance is critical to overcoming the sense of injustice, vulnerability and exclusion that can fuel social discontent. Hence, the Nigerian Government should create conflict resolution frameworks and mechanisms that can adequately deal with workplace conflicts and assuage the interests of the two workplace parties for the continued growth, peace and stability of Nigeria.

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