

REFLECTING ON GROUP DYNAMIC APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

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Conflict can result into a crisis in an organization if there is no best approach to resolve conflict. Conflict may arise when educational philosophies, treatment approaches or service delivery strategy is incompatible. This often lead to prevalence conflict between communities, departments within institutions of higher learning and student who are the main consumers of education product. Organization with structure that allows at least two units to share functional boundaries are bound to experience conflict. Conflicts are almost inevitable in public universities due to organizational structures for both staff and students who share functional boundaries through exchange of knowledge. In Universities situations, conflicts occur between “functional Partners” academic and administrative staff; academic staff of departments with faculty; administrative staff and the workers’ unions and also between administrative and students performance. Understanding the consequences of organizational conflict as well as its antecedent provides the organizational designer or manager with additional insights necessary to achieve optimal performance. This paper discusses conflict episodes in relation to antecedent and consequences; Identifies approaches used by the Vice chancellors in resolving conflict and also its presents an approach that can be used by universities in Kenya in dealing with conflicts that involves two intra – organization units. The paper presents a hypothetical treatment of an academic staff and registrars’ conflict as a test on whether group dynamic approach can work.

Keywords: Conflict, management, academic staff, students, group dynamic approach

Introduction and Background

Lack of proficiency in conflict management style has a pervasive detrimental impact on productivity and organization goals and objectives. Conflict may arise when educational philosophies, treatment approaches or service delivery strategy is incompatible. This often lead to prevalence conflict between communities, university governance and student who are the main consumers of education in universities. Managing conflict constructively and developing effective conflict resolution procedures encourages the development of value, attitude, knowledge and civic standards in the institutions of higher learning. Humans are very imperfect communicators and sometimes this imperfection generates conflict.

Conflicts frequently communicated accurately when they have not occurred, it is that managers are expected to facilitate harmony between people of different views and cultural study which a very typical example of school environment (Odundo & Wagude, 2010). Most studies of conflict within communities have focused on the immediate outcomes of the conflict episodes, such as delivery quality, satisfaction, or communities to the solution (Pelled, Eisenhardt, &

Xin, 1999). When the groups work through conflicts, however, they are not simply resolving an immediate mismatch, they are also establishing patterns of behavior that may apply in the future. Important in their own right, these patterns seem likely to influence distance outcomes as well. The competence of a manager in any organization depends on the management ability to resolve conflict in their organizations. Educators need to find ways to legitimize intrigues and control controversy within organizational life. Management as communicated behavior which includes understanding the type of conflict as well as the impact they have upon organization. It heavily occurs in life and must be constructively managed (Odundo & Wagude, 2010).

Presently, conflict continues to be a factor in academic life and universities frequently appear to be centers of tensions; or perhaps a manifestation of problem in the community. Any chief executive or manager of an organization must learn how to cope effectively with intra-organizational conflicts and must gain an understanding of their antecedents. Coping with conflict does not only mean eliminating or reducing its level, for conflict can at times be organizationally healthy and necessary for compromise



and better performance. For example, conflict in an organization can allow for better communication and mutual exchange, or create more input into the system. Whether or not the executive attempts to resolve conflict and work toward collaboration or attempts to stimulate conflict, he/she should develop a deliberate strategy aimed at organizational effectiveness through Organizational Development (OD) Intervention Programmes. Surprisingly, while conflict has been universally viewed as something to avoid, it has been very difficult to point either to organizations that have completely collapsed as a result of conflict or to organizations that have been extremely successful as a result of non-conflict. Usually, salient compromises are reached. Unfortunately, organizational methods research has so far not provided a cookbook for an executive to use during periods of conflict. However, recently, attempts have been made to try to help executives identify precursors to impending organizational conflicts.

A significant point, which is often overlooked, is the inherent conflict that arises as a result of organizational structure. Obviously, structure causes conflicts in organizations, especially at those points where functions merge. Though certainly untrue, it may seem that organizational conflicts are either intended by the organization's designers or are unintended results of a faulty design. Understanding the consequences of organizational conflict as well as its antecedents provides organization designers with additional insights to effect optimal performance. No matter how effectively an organization has been designed, the chief executive still needs a repertoire of techniques to aid him/her in resolving unintended conflict or stimulate needed conflict.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is twofold.

First, it discusses conflict episodes in relation to its antecedents and consequences. Second, it presents an approach that can be used by managers or chief executives to resolve conflicts among intra-organizational groups or units. In university situations, conflicts commonly occur between "functional partners" academic and administrative staff, academic staff of departments within a faculty, administrative staff and the workers' union, and also between the administration and the student population. Conflicts within a university environment are usually expressed as latent (e.g., academic versus administrative staff), suppressed (e.g., academic staff of departments in a faculty), or malevolent (e.g., between the administration and students). Conflicts arise universally between these various groups, and almost always they are caused by a sharing of functional boundaries. Thus, this paper will deal specifically with the management of conflict between the academic and administrative staff of universities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study operates under Human Needs and Conflict Resolutions theory. Conflict - resolution theories answers to end conflicts before they start or record to physical fighting. Burton (1991) suggests that conflict resolutions means terminating conflict by methods that are analytical, the lead to the root of the problems and points to an outcome acceptable to parties involved and a paramount solution. The study was based on the two theory since its interested in the conflict managers style of vice chancellors. The Thomas Kilmann (1979) model of conflict management (Figure 1) is adopted for this study. This study uses the model in describing the five conflict management style. The five styles are namely: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, compromising, which form the core variables.

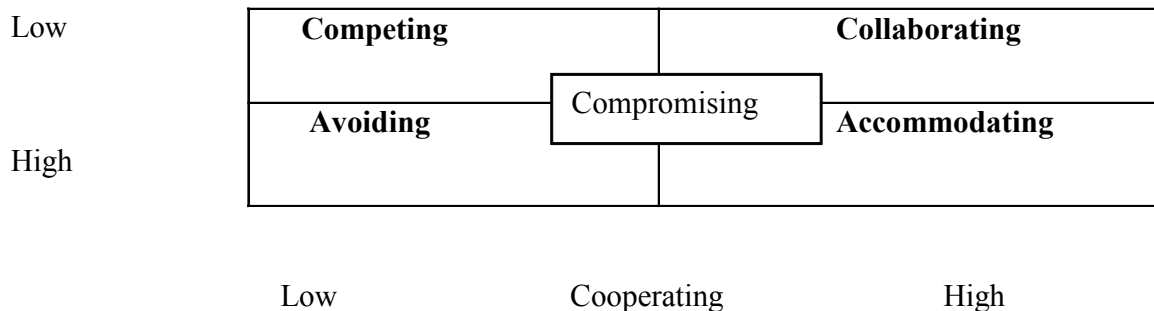


Figure 1. The Thomas Kilmann conflict model.

According to Gross and Guerrero (2000) the effectiveness of individual is perceived based on which conflict management styles he chooses to incorporate. They discovered that an integrative conflict is generally perceived as the most appropriate strategy and most effective style. The inappropriate strategy, the obliging style were generally perceived as both ineffective and inappropriate. Finally, compromising was perceived as a relatively neutral style.

Research Design and Methodology

The study examined conflict management style of the vice chancellors. It used a descriptive approach discussing the belief and attitudes held by the vice chancellors. The research was also qualitative in nature and supported by qualitative method. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used because they provide different perspectives and have different assumptions and look at different things. The qualitative method helped to reveal practices while quantitative assisted with qualified data. The investigation captured conflict management style used in the organizations (Wiersman, 1986). The population in the study composed vice chancellors selected from various universities in Kenya. As Best and Kahn (1993) indicate studying the whole population helps to generalize and discover principles that have universal application. The researcher used Thomas Kilmann (1979) tool which is most widely used questionnaire of its type in both research and management training. The researcher personally administered the questionnaire to 50 vice chancellors. The researcher collected the completed questions for analysis. The analysis synthesizes data and searched for patterns. Data processing is the condensation of scores or data into tabular form by various systematizing methods, the choice of which will depend on sample size and the processing facilities available. In the case of this study, the analyst used means and percentages to analyze data.

Literature Review

The usual conflict between two individuals or groups within an organization is better analyzed using a sequence of conflict episodes, and each episode begins with conditions characterized by certain conflict potentials. Conflict is, therefore, a dynamic process. It may at times be subterranean, in which case the parties involved may not be aware of it and may not develop hostile feelings for one another. But whether

conflict is subterranean or is openly manifested, the behaviour of the parties involved conforms to the five stages of conflict episodes identified by Pondy (1967): (1) latent conflict (conditional), (2) perceived conflict (cognitive), (3) felt conflict (affective), (4) manifest conflict (behavioural), and (5) conflict aftermath (conditional).

Latent Conflict

Three basic types of latent conflict exist in organizations: (a) competition for scarce resources, (b) drives for autonomy, and (c) divergence of sub-unit goals. Competition for scarce resources forms the basis of conflict when the aggregated demands of participants for resources exceed the resources available in the organization. Autonomy drives are those when one group either seeks to exercise control over some activity that another party regards as its own domain or seeks to insulate itself from such control. Who should have full control over the recruitment of academic staff in universities - administrators or academicians? Goal divergence is a source of conflict when two parties who must cooperate on some joint activity are unable to reach a consensus on concerted action.

Perceived Conflict

Conflict may sometimes be perceived when no conditions of latent conflict exist, and latent conflict conditions may be present in a relationship without any of the parties perceiving the conflict. The case in which conflict is perceived when no latent conflict exists is usually handled by a semantic model. This means that conflict has resulted from the parties' misunderstanding of one another's true position, and such conflict can be easily resolved by improving communication between the parties. The semantic model has been the basis of a wide variety of management techniques aimed at improving interpersonal and intergroup relations. Issues that touch on tribalism, sexism, and academic attainment are good examples of conflicts involving suppression mechanisms. Tardiness, absence from duty, leaking official secrets are examples of attention focus mechanisms. It is not uncommon, however, for suppression mechanisms to filter into attention-focus mechanisms when personal values assume the status of organizational values.



Felt Conflict

Although felt conflict is related to perceived conflict, they are different. If an individual or group X is aware of a disagreement with another individual or group Y over some policy, X may not become tense or anxious and the disagreement may have no effect whatsoever on X's feelings toward Y. It is only when conflict is personalized that it becomes a dysfunction to organizations. Other anxieties result from identity crisis or from extra-organizational pressures. Felt conflict can become personalized when the whole personality of the individual or group is involved in the relationship. Hostile feelings are most commonly generated in the intimate relations that characterize total institutions like Kenya's residential universities. In order to dissipate accumulated hostilities, total institutions require certain safety-valve methods like stopping lectures and sending students home during demonstrations and unrests. Felt conflict, therefore, may arise from sources independent of the three types of latent conflict, but latent conflict may provide appropriate target for undirected tensions.

Manifest Conflict

This may be any of several types of conflictive behaviour. The most obvious is open aggression, although physical or verbal violence is usually strongly proscribed by organizational norms. Only in extreme workers' demonstrations or student unrest is violence, as a form of manifest conflict, experienced in organizations. The urge toward violence may be there but it tends to be expressed in more subtle terms like in sit-ins and boycott of lectures. Dalton (1959), for instance, documented certain overt attempts to sabotage or block an opponent's through aggressive and defensive coalitions.

Table 1

Order of Conflict Management Styles

Choice Style	Average Score	Percentage
1 st Collaborator	15.95	31.9
2 nd Compromises	12.35	24.7
3 rd Controller	9.45	18.9
4 th Accommodator	6.4	12.8
5 th Avoider	5.85	11.7
	Total 50	100.00

tions.

Conflict Aftermath

Each conflict episode is but one in a sequence of such episodes that constitute the relationships among organization participants. If the conflict is genuinely resolved to the satisfaction of all participants, then the basis for a more cordial relationship is laid. The participants may then, in their drive for a more ordered relationship, focus on latent conflicts not previously perceived and dealt with. If, however, the conflict is merely suppressed but not resolved, the latent conflict conditions may be aggravated and may result in more serious problems until they are fully resolved or until the functional relationship subsides. However, since most organizations do not operate in a closed system, the environment in which the organization is set may become benevolent by easing the precursory conditions under which the latent conflict ensued

Results and Discussion

Conflict Management Styles of Vice-Chancellors in Kenya

When Thomas Kilman question is completed the number of points assigned for each score of the five responses for the twelve situations are transferred to appropriate scoring form. (Appendix 1). The results were transferred to Thomas Kilman graph (figure 1), the pie chart (figure 2) and bar chart (figure 3). Table 1 shows analysis of the order of conflict management style of the vice chancellors

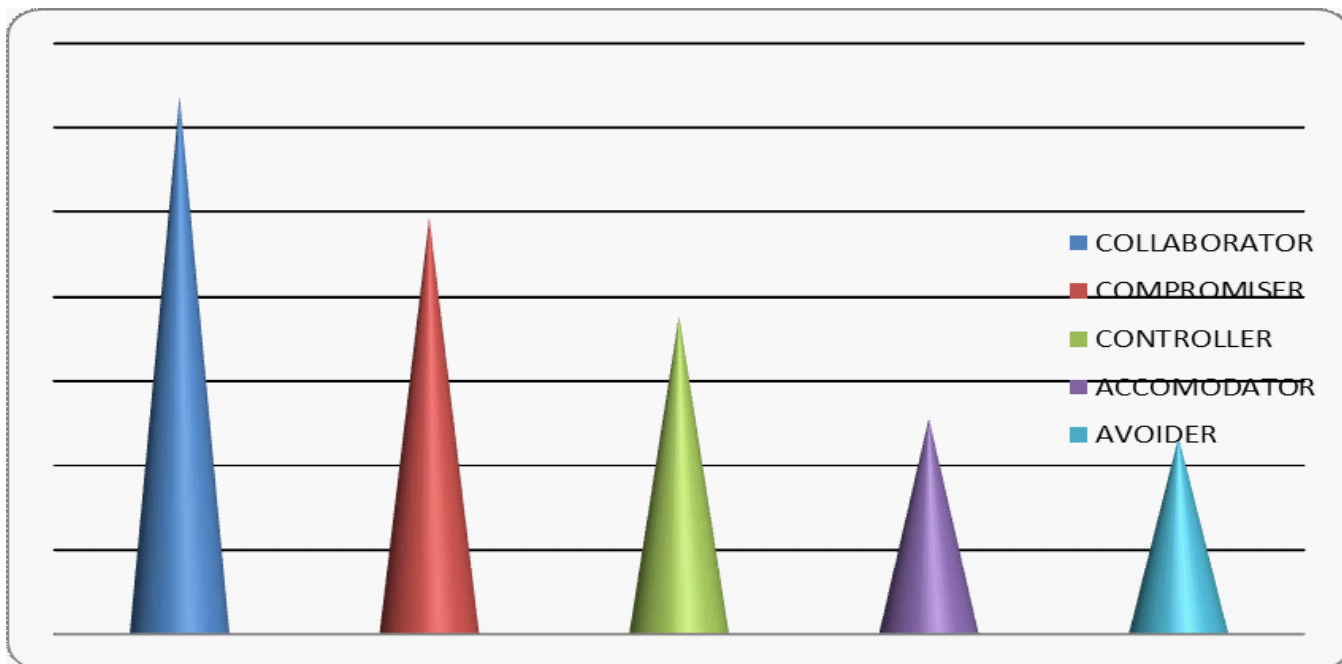


Figure 2. Conflict management styles.

Those reported controlling were 18.9 %. They are assertive and un cooperative individual who pursues his/her concerns a the other people's expense. This is power united made appropriate for win - win situation. For the accommodating mode, 12'8% of the respondents fall in the orders. They are un assertive and un cooperative opposite of controlling. There is an element of self-sacrificing in these mode. It may take form of generosity or charity or yielding to another point of new. For the avoiding mode, 11.7% are in this category. These mode reflect that the Vice - chancellors do not address the conflict might take to diplomacy or side stepping an issue.

A Case Management: Conflict Between Administrative and Academic Groups

The dynamics of conflict episodes have been analyzed above and are show in table 1 and Figure 2. Vice Chancellors tend to manage conflict by either collaborating; compromising, controlling, accommodating and lastly by avoiding conflict all together. Managing conflicts more constructively is a goal of all the vice chancellors. The success of these approaches have been determined by examining their provisions for effective conflict resolution within the shortest possible period. The weaknesses of these approaches lie in their attempts to change the personality of individuals and the considerable period of time needed to achieve conflict resolution.

The above attempts have demonstrated the need for an intervention programme that can be both comprehensive and of short duration. The approach presented in this paper on the background of the management style of the vice chancellors attempts to fulfill these conditions. It is an approach that can be used to resolve intergroup conflicts between the administrative and academic staff of universities.

Case Study

Department X wishes to hire a senior lecturer to help with the graduate students (Master's Level) of which there are 230. The Head of Department X applies to the Appointment and Promotions (A & F) Committee for the approval of a senior lectureship position. At the meeting of the A & F, the University Registrar objects to Department X's application on the grounds that the department can fulfill its teaching duties with the existing staff and that there is more pressing need for a senior lectureship position in another Department Y. The issues get very personal. The head of Department X interprets the Registrar's objection to the request as revenge for his (Head of Dept. X) refusal, as Chairman of the University Housing Committee, to allocate quarters for a senior administrative assistant in the Registrar's Office. The Head of Department X consults with other heads of departments, and



they reach a consensus that the Registrar is generally uncooperative with the academic staff. At the same time, the Registrar consults with his administrative staff about the heads of departments. Their consensus is that the academic staff think they are superior to the administrative staff. Two groups emerge and conflict ensues. The issue draws in other university policy-making bodies, and the Vice-Chancellor is informed of the conflict.

Phases of Conflict Resolution

Preparation for the intervention. The preparation phase involves some diagnostic work. Diagnosis is fundamental in managing conflicts as espoused by Burke and Hornstein (1972). They reasoned that diagnosis not only helps to determine the need for intervention, but also (a) gives the manager a feel for the situation, and (b) determines the parties' motivations for and commitment to a problem-solving intervention. If there is low motivation and commitment on the part of either or both parties, Burke and Hornstein suggested that such an intervention should be delayed or called off. Motivation and commitment are key ingredients to an organization's conflict management.

The V.C. should ensure that representatives are not selected because selection can be biased in favour of the "weak" or "strong" bargainers. It is advisable that those in the organizational hierarchy who are responsible for the groups also attend, i.e., deans and heads of departments for the academic group and the Registrar and deputy Registrar(s) for the administrative group. The pre-intervention meeting should be conducted by the V.C. himself, who is the head and is superior to both groups. The purpose of having the V.C. preside at the meeting is to officially sanction the intervention and to present mandates (what he expects to be accomplished, and an explanation of the boundaries of the intervention). The mandates, in effect, will point to what decisions can be made, what actions can be taken, and the rules governing the participants. The V.C. should clearly explain the purpose and design of the intervention and should emphasize that the intervention will not attempt to change any individual's personality or character structure, but will strive to dig into the roots of the real problems(s) and suggest ways for correcting them. Since the pre-intervention meeting will be designed to be open, questions relating to the actual intervention will be

answered by the V.C. It is expected that this preparation phase will not last more than two hours.

The Intervention

The intervention phase is divided into five steps:

Image exchange. First, participants are divided into their natural groupings, i.e., academic and administrative to exchange perceptions. Each of the two groups will work separately for some time and produce three lists on sheets of paper. The three lists are responses to the following questions: How do we see ourselves and our responsibilities? How do we see the other group? How do we think they see us? Each group tries to predict the other as closely as possible. The lists can be in sentences, phrases, or one-word adjectives. The V.C. should stress that only personal involvement and discovery is important in this step; there should be no wrestling with the problems yet. When honestly done, image exchange could reveal some perceptions which might help in managing the problems(s). Exchange and sharing of perceptions help to sharpen the core issues involved in the interface.

When the lists are completed, the exchange of perceptions can follow. The first group to volunteer can start the exchange; if not, the group that comes first in the alphabetical order starts. In this case, Academic (A) will start before the Administrative (B). First, the academic staff presents its list of "How do we see ourselves and our responsibilities?" Second, the administrative staff presents its list of "How do we see them (the academics)?" Third, the academics present its list of "How do we think they see us?" Fourth, the administration presents its list of "How do we see ourselves and our responsibilities?" Fifth, the academics present its list of "How do we see them (the administration)?" Sixth, the administration presents its list of "How do we think they see us?"

The reason for this order of presentation is that it maximizes exchange, i.e., one group's presentation is followed by the other group, providing for quick feedback. However, during the presentations questions of clarification only can be entertained. The exchange is not the time to debate differences or take issue, but it is the time when data is presented for further exploration and understanding.

Problem identification. Second, participants attempt to identify the problem (s). This step covers

four segments. The task of identifying problems that exist in the interface is the first segment. To effectively do this all six of the image exchange lists are displayed conspicuously so that participants can use the data to formulate their thoughts and feelings. Initial problem formulations should be done by individual participants to allow for independent thoughts and recapitulations and to maximize conditions for a comprehensive coverage of problems. The second segment involves a separate meeting of the two groups to consolidate individual formulations into a group list. Problems not previously identified during the individual work are likely to surface in the group discussion. As a third segment, each group presents its lists to the other group. This gives each group a chance to understand what the other group's perception of the problems are, and participants may gain an insight into what emphasis each group places on which issues. The fourth segment involves integrating the two lists. Each group will select about three or four of its members (depending on group size and time available) to meet and deliberate on the integrated list. The selected participants will take both lists and restate the problems clearly and succinctly to avoid repetition and overlap. The unselected participants can observe the selected group working together in the center. Problems seem to be solved much easier when fewer people are involved.

Initiating problem-solving mode. Third, participants attempt to prioritize problems and seek for a solution. The V.C. initiates two basic rules. Each selected group participant selects from the integrated list, problems he/she sees as the most crucial and ranks them from significant to the least significant. The rankings are tallied and the top problems which occur most often are selected from the pool of problems. Then, each selected participant makes a first and second choice of the problems he/she would like to work on from the prioritized list. As soon as the choices are made, problem-solving groups are formed, with half of the group members from the academic staff and the other half from the administrative staff. Since each group will have different perceptions of the problem, the combination of members from the groups will contribute significantly to the problem-solving task. Also, the degree of misunderstanding and suspicion among the group is reduced when both groups have a chance to interact with one another toward a superordinate goal (Sherif & Sherif, 1956).

Problem-solving task. Fourth, the V.C. can

introduce a directed discussion on problem-solving. The force field analysis technique as used by Hornstein, Bunker, Burke, Gindes, and Lewicki (1971) can serve as a useful guide. No matter what technique of problem-solving the manager adopts, this step should include detailed problem identification, illustrations and examples of how problems are solved, an analysis of causes of the problem and an objective for change, selection of appropriate restraining force for reduction of the problem, brainstorming ideas for reducing the restraining force(s), testing the brainstorming list for feasibility and choice-making, and finally, planning steps for action.

Problem-solving intervention. Fifth, an intervention is made in problem-solving. Once the problem solving technique is understood by participants, a problem area identified by a selected group is chosen. One selected group presents its work to the other selected groups. The other groups critique the presenting group's work with adequate and honest feedback. Since the remaining small groups act as a resource to the presenting small group, the feedback and suggestions given are indicative of the problem area participants need to work on when they return to their normal duties. The difference between a problem solved at this time and the initial problem(s) is that groups are now committed and there is shared ownership of responsibilities. All problems are presented in turns by the selected groups and equal focus and attention should be given to all identified problems regardless of how insignificant they appear.

When the phases of the intervention have been completed, the whole group is once more assembled to evaluate what has transpired in the group process and to indicate thoughts and feelings about the state of the university at that point. These evaluations may be done orally or in written form. If there is a need to document the process, a well-constructed evaluation questionnaire can be provided for completion.

The purpose of the evaluation is to appraise the intervention process and to scrutinize the participant's feelings. General problems other than those treated and individual participants' contributions to the process are not evaluated. Most intervention processes of this kind generally take between four to six hours to complete, depending on the number of participants and problems identified, and also, the motivation of the participants. The completion of the intervention and evaluation processes now leaves the conflict manager, i.e., the Vice-Chancellor, with op-



tions for planned action or a follow-up.

Aftermath and follow-up. The procedures for follow-up may take a variety of forms. The Vice Chancellor may elect to consult further with the problem-solving groups formed in the intervention process or he may decide to plan for another intervention. Consulting with the problem-solving groups helps the V.C. to concretize the solutions arrived at and make necessary organizational adjustments or changes. However, such a procedure tends to over-stress the conflict and make members feel superior to the rest of the participants. Planning for another intervention may be expensive, but its success helps to assure the conflict manager that the problem(s) have been solved completely. No matter which way the V.C. decides to go, his follow-up decisions should be planned and executed as a function of the basic processes of university development. After all, the development of a university is a continuous process of planned social intervention based on a sound stage-by-stage diagnosis.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The theory of conflict proposed by Pondy (1967) gives a comprehensive account of conflicts that occur daily in organizations. A knowledge of the conflict episodes helps an organization's chief executive learn how to cope more effectively with intra-organizational conflicts and again a better understanding of conflict antecedents. The group dynamic approach presented in this paper provides a suitable model for organizational conflict managers and points to a technique that can be adopted to enhance organizational effectiveness and performance. The intervention process suggested can be effected in not more than two days. Too much has been lost in organizations, universities in particular, as a result of conflicts which have not been effectively managed. The case of academic/administrative staff conflict highlighted here is one of several conflicts that occur in universities. To date, no attempt has been made to seek a suitable problem-solving technique. The example presented here can go a long way to solve many of the problems that continually beset our institutions. Latent, perceived felt or manifest conflicts between our university administrators and students, administrators and workers' unions, academic staff 'of faculties, etc. cause significant hindrance to the goal of quality education and research expected of our universities. The onus of conflict resolution, however, rests with our university Vice-Chancellors and their

advisors.

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