INTEGRATING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TRAINING (TVET): BUSINESS EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

BY

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Abstract

Conflict is unavoidable in every human organization. It cannot be eliminated but may be managed and mitigated. The ability to successfully minimize and resolve conflict in organizations is an important skill for technical and vocational education especially business educators. A major reason for this is that business educators are faced with the classic confrontation between individual and organizational needs, requiring them to spend a major part of their time mediating in conflict situations. To determine the 'appropriate' management strategy in a given situation requires accurate identification of the conflict origin, parties concerned, and their relationships in order to apply the most effective management strategy. Ideally, this strategy must reduce the dysfunctional dimension of conflict so as to maximize its functionality for the good of all concerned, thereby building capacity for sustainable development. Since conflict is inevitable in organizations, business educators must be prepared to manage it effectively in order to derive the greatest possible benefits. In this paper, we seek to broaden business educators' understanding of the concept of conflict, highlight modalities for its management, and make a strong case for the integration of conflict management courses in Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Key Words: Conflict Management, Technical Vocational Education, Business Education

Introduction

Business Education is one of the inter-related fields of vocational education with a broad comprehensive discipline appealing to a wide range of the youths and adults. Business education is an educational programme that equips an individual with functional and suitable skills, knowledge, attitude and value that would enable an individual operate in the environment he/she finds himself/ herself (Njoku 2006). Osuala (2004) defined Business education as a programme of instruction which consists of two parts:

Office education, a vocational programme of office careers through initial refresher and upgrading education, and General education, a programme to provide students with information and competence which are needed by all in managing personal business affairs and in using the services of the business.

Business education plays a vital role in the economic growth and development of our nation by equipping citizens with salable skills and competencies for a meaningful

living. However, competition for scarce resources, differences in values and inconsistencies among business educators may bring about discord (caltz, fuglested and lillejord, 2002). This may leads to communication barriers, role ambiguity, unclear expectation, and disagreement on task and content issues resulting to conflict. More so, these parties may see one another as adversaries, not as those working toward a common goal especially when dealing with a consensus opinion concerning what is and what ought not to be in a given system. The intensity of these differences has seen a further increase in civil strife, insurgencies and restiveness especially as conflict is most suppressed or ignored. The damages as well as the subsequent social and economic implications in the wake of these challenges are a source of concern to developmental objectives. These has brought about the imperative need to consider modifying the curriculum of the business education programme so that students will also be open to the element of ingenious thinking sufficient enough to manage, mitigate and resolve conflict in organizations or any given system.

The Concept of Conflict and Conflict Management

Conflict is a phenomenon that is an important part of human existence and a natural part of our daily lives. In the 21st century, conflict is a complex problem both in its causes and in its consequences and a total absence of conflict would be unbelievable, boring and a strong indication that conflicts are being suppressed. (Flippo, 1980)

Conflict may be defined as a clash within an individual or between two or more people where needs, objectives, values, interests and perception of one individual or group do not agree with those of another individuals or group (Erasmua Swart and Morietta 2000). According to Knoon (1991), conflict refers to perceived or experienced incompatible differences within an individual or between two or more individuals which may lead to some or other form of opposition. Achoka (1990) defines conflict as any situation in which two or more persons or group perceive that their goals are incompatible while Slabbet (1987) describes conflict as a dynamic process of interaction between two or more people or groups competing for a rare resources, whose conflict objectives or needs have irreconcilable standard.

There is absolutely no agreement among scholars on the concept even though there is no disagreement on its manifestation and impact on the society. The conceptual problem is further compounded by the realization that there are many types of conflicts. These include; family conflict, personal conflict, communal conflict, cultural conflict, religious conflict, racial conflict, ethnic conflict and international conflict (Akpan and Galadima 2003). Conflict is almost always analyzed from different ideological persuasions and most particularly the liberal and Marxist perspectives. Whatever perspective or position from which conflict is examined, its nature and goals are technically speaking the same and that is, the existence of

incompatibility of interest (Innocent, Abiodun, Otoabasi and Amedi, 2006)

Jones (1994) sees conflict management as programmes that teach individuals concepts and skills for preventing, managing and peacefully resolving conflicts. These programmes demonstrate that educators and learners can quickly learn to use effective conflict management skills. The acquisition of conflict management skills empowers individuals to take responsibility for their own conflicts and for the resolution of those conflicts (Walters 2004).

There are mechanisms in societies that make conflict inevitable and inexorable hence, making conflict management a very important subject. For instance power differential, scarcity of human and material resources, and the management of human capital resources would likely result in conflict. Business Educators are faced with the typical argument between individual needs and organizational needs which would require conflict management skills. Business Educators must be prepared to manage it effectively on order to derive the greatest possible benefits there-from hence, the need for the re-engineering of Technical Vocational Education and Training towards Capacity building and sustainable development.

Conflict Management Strategies

Conflict management implies integration of all factors which can contribute to conflict resolution and its prevention. Those factors are improvement of communication and practicing discipline in the organization as well as having in mind the parties included.

Thomas (1976) provides what might be considered one of the most useful models of conflict management by utilizing the contingency approach to conflict diagnosis. This typology examines five styles of conflict management. , Two basic dimensions of behaviour that can produce conflict are identified: attempting to satisfy one's own concerns (organizational demands in the case of administrators) and attempting to satisfy others' concerns (individual needs of the members). From this analysis, five major perspectives are identified which may be used in conceptualizing conflict and behaviours commonly associated with those perspectives (Thomas, 1976). These perspectives/management styles are identified as avoidance, compromise/sharing, competition/ domination, accommodation and collaboration/integration.

Avoidance: this is often a form of flight suggesting indifference, evasion, withdrawal, or isolation. Being unassertive and uncooperative can also represent a delay tactic.

Compromise/sharing: this involves splitting the difference or giving up something to get something.

Competition/domination: this frequently means a desire to win at the other's expense. It is a win-lose power struggle where the opinions and interests of others are of little concern.

Accommodation: this can be an appeasement or submission to others at your own expense. On occasion it can represent generosity, while at other times it might

mean conserving energy and resources by giving up a few battles in order to win the war.

Collaboration/integration: this represents a desire to fully satisfy the interests of both parties. It is a mutually beneficial stance based on trust and problem solving.

Thomas (1976) proposes that each of the five management styles identified may be effective depending on the situation. In fact, he matches the five conflict management styles with the appropriate situation as follows:

Avoidance
- When the issue is trivial
- When the costs outweigh the benefits of resolution
- To let the situation cool down
- When getting more information is imperative
- When others can solve the problem more effectively
- When the problem is a symptom rather than a cause

Compromise/sharing
- When the objectives are important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption likely to result from assertive behaviour
- When there is a "standoff"
- To gain temporary settlements to complex problems
- To expedite action when time is important
- When collaboration or competition fails

Competition/domination
- When quick, decisive action is essential, as in emergencies
- When critical issues require unpopular action, as in cost cutting
- When issues are vital to the welfare of the organization
- Against individuals who take unfair advantage of others

Accommodation
- When you find you have made a mistake
- When the issues are more important to others
- To build good will for more important matters
- To minimize losses when defeat is inevitable
- When harmony and stability are articularly important
- To allow subordinates a chance to learn from their mistakes

Collaboration/integration
- When both sets of concerns are so important that only an integrative solution is acceptable; compromise is nsatisfactory
- When the goal is to learn
- To integrate insights from individuals with different perspectives
- When consensus and commitment are important
- To break through ill feelings that have hindered relationships.

Five typical approaches and strategies on conflict management are highlighted below:

1. Dominance: This occurs when the co-operation is extremely low and the persistence in satisfying of personal interest is high. By this strategy, conflict is resolved in a way to satisfy the needs of one party and damaging the other party involved in the conflict.

2. Integration: This occurs when cooperation is high as well as the persistence in satisfying one's own needs, so there is to be sought for appropriate solution for all parties involved in the conflict.

3. Compromise: this occurs when there is an equal wish for medium level of cooperation and persistence in satisfying one's needs. By this, the conflict is resolved so that each party involved in the conflict would give up a part of the value.

4. Avoiding: This occurs when the co-operation as well as persistence in satisfying one's personal needs is very low. In that case, the conflict resolution will be solved by withdrawal or repression of conflict.

5. Cooperativeness: This occurs when the readiness of cooperation is extremely high and conflict is resolved by putting the other party's interest before its own.

Justification to Integrate Conflict Management into Technical Vocational Education and Training

Conflict is inevitable in an organization and is inherently neither functional nor dysfunctional; it simply has the potential for improving or impairing organizational performance depending on how it is managed (Stoner 1989). As a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of educational process involving in addition to general education the study of technologies and related science and acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupation in various sectors of economic and social life (NPE 2004), Technical Vocational Education and Training as an instrument for promoting sound sustainable development would not achieve its aims if individuals especially Business Educators with salable skills who are also expected to serve as change agents are consumed by differences and discord that could be mitigated through conflict management.

The integration of conflict management into Technical Vocational Education and Training (Business Education in particular) would amongst others achieve the following:

a) Prepare Business Educators for negotiation, including identifying key stakeholders and analyzing their positions, interests, and sources of leverage

b) Help Business Educators in cultivating relationships with constituents and counterparts, especially across cultures, including through active listening and trust building

c) Assist in focusing on interests, including those that are shared, conflicting, or compatible

d) Provide skills in solving problems by separating them analytically, establishing criteria, and generating options

e) Help in implementing agreements, including establishing verification, dispute resolution, and enforcement mechanisms

f) provide education for global security and focus on direct organized violence, particularly in conflict situations,

employing the framework based on recent theories of human security.

g) promote the concept of human dignity and human rights with specific reference . to such values as economic equity, political participation, ecological balance and particularly knowledge transfer.

h) be an investment in the younger generations and attests to the fact that by educating younger minds in the virtue of conflict management, identification of conflicts and sources of conflicts, the future could be secured.

i) empower individuals to take responsibility for their own conflicts and for the resolution of those conflicts.

j) empower business educators and make them effective in the world of works.

k) equip individuals with skills on how to present ideas and feelings clearly, concisely, calmly, and honestly.

l) improve upon the skills to evaluate all problems, serve as a mediator and problem solver.

Conclusion

Conflict is everywhere. The good news is that conflict can be extremely productive for organizations and individuals and conflicting management skills can be learned. High performing leaders are effective at dealing with conflict because they use conflict management skills effectively. Integrating conflict management in TVET, especially in Business education will equip business education graduates with diversified knowledge and creative abilities to mediate mitigate and manage conflict between government, employers of labor, the work force and agents of development while contributing to capacity building and sustainable development.

Recommendations

For conflict management to be integrated in TVET, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should be trained and re-trained in the areas of conflict management.

2. Business education students should be taught effectively the concepts, strategies of conflict management and its implications.

3. The department of Vocational education should constantly organize workshops for student and invite professionals in the field of conflict management to make presentations

4. Teachers should be sponsored to attend local, national and international conferences on conflict management.

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