

Conflict: Challenges and Mechanisms Head Teachers can use to Manage Conflict towards an improvement Teacher Morale in Public Primary Schools in Eldoret Municipality, Kenya

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Abstract

Improving employee morale benefits everyone in the workplace. Boosting employee morale means that people will take more pride in their work, call in sick less often and be more productive. Happier employees mean happier employers, since the employer will not lose money due to inefficiency and lost time. Improving employee morale can be accomplished fairly easy. Studies have shown managers spend 24 to 60 percent of their time on trying to solve employee disputes (Bell, 2002). Since individuals all comprise of different mindsets it's quite possible that there may be arguments or differences of opinion regarding certain issues. You'll find this happening most often in places of work. Usually there are different types of conflict but the ones causing most tense environments are those pertaining to the office. This is so as most of our time is spent there. So where there are more people, and you spend more time, you are likely to engage in heated arguments as well. In many cases, conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life. However, the role of the head teacher as pertaining conflict resolution is generally unknown. As such, the purpose of this study was to find out the challenges head teacher's face in conflict resolutions and to establish mechanism necessary in managing conflicts in schools without necessarily reducing teacher morale in the workplace.

This study targeted head teachers and teachers in public primary schools in Eldoret Municipality who are believed to have worked in their stations for over a minimum of three years. The units for analysis for this study was be head teachers and teachers in public primary schools in Eldoret Municipality. The study adopted simple random, stratified and proportionate probability sampling techniques. The target population was 60 teachers and by using simple random sampling the head teachers and teachers was stratified into stratas. Data collected was processed, coded and analyzed to facilitate answering the research questions. This was done using descriptive statistics. The study found out that conflicts in the workplace are not solved because most of the head teachers are not capable of handling because they lack resolution skill and this hence lead to low teacher morale since no conflicts are effectively channeled in schools or organizations. This study therefore advocated for training and awareness of head teachers regarding conflict resolution processes.

Keywords: Challenges, Conflict, Morale Mechanisms Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Improving employee morale benefits everyone in the workplace.

Boosting employee morale means that people will take more pride in their work, call in sick less often and be more productive. Happier employees mean happier employers, since the employer will not lose money due to inefficiency and lost time. Improving employee morale can be accomplished fairly easy. Studies have shown managers spend 24 to 60 percent of their time on trying to solve employee disputes (Bell, 2002).

Since individuals all comprise of different mindsets it's quite possible that there may be arguments or differences of opinion regarding certain issues. You'll find this happening most often in places of work. Usually there are different types of conflict but the ones causing most tense environments are those pertaining to the office. This is so as most of our time is spent there. So where there are more people, and you spend more time, you are likely to engage in heated arguments as well. In many cases, conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life. Conflict can therefore cost company productivity, money and employee satisfaction. Studies show that early intervention is the key to managing conflicts before they become crises (Burke, 1996). The fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: as long as it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth.

In an organizational set-up, managers are overseers of their employees. In many cases, effective conflict resolution skills can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes. However, the role of the head teacher as pertaining conflict resolution is generally unknown. As such, the purpose of this study was to find out the role of the head teacher in managing conflicts without necessarily reducing employee morale in the workplace. Contemporary theory recognizes that conflicts between human beings are unavoidable. They emerge as a natural result of change and can be beneficial to the organization, if managed efficiently.

It further considers innovation as a mechanism for bringing together various ideas and viewpoints into a new and different fusion. An atmosphere of tension, and hence conflict, is thus essential in any organization committed to developing or working with new ideas (Kirchhoff and Adams, 1982).

Definition of Conflict

Conflict is defined as disagreement between individuals. It can vary from a mild disagreement to a win-or-lose, emotion-packed, confrontation (Kirchoff and Adams, 1982). According to De Bono (1985), Conflict may be defined as the struggle or contest between people who have opposing ideas, needs, beliefs, goals and even values. He further defines conflict clearly as a clash of interests, values, actions views or directions.

Strategies for managing conflicts

According to Tosi, Rizzo, and Carroll (1986) there four ways of managing conflicts, namely through:

Styles. Conflict handling behaviour styles (such as competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance or accommodation) may be suitably encouraged, depending upon the situation.

Improving organizational practices. After identifying the reason for the conflict situation, suitable organizational practices can be used to resolve conflicts, including; establishing superordinate goals, reducing vagueness, minimizing authority- and domain-related disputes, improving policies, procedures and rules, re-apportioning existing resources or adding new, altering communications, movement of personnel, and changing reward systems.

Special roles and structure. A manager has to initiate structural changes needed, including re-location or merging of specialized units, shoulder liaison functions, and act as an integrator to resolve conflicts.

A person with problem-solving skills and respected by the conflicting parties can be designated to de-fuse conflicts.

Confrontation techniques. Confrontation techniques aim at finding a mutually acceptable and enduring solution through collaboration and compromise. It is done in the hope that conflicting parties are ready to face each other amicably, and entails intercession, bargaining, negotiation, mediation, attribution and application of the integrative decision method, which is a collaborative style based on the premise that there is a solution which can be accepted by both parties. It involves a process of defining the problem, searching for alternatives and their evaluation, and deciding by consensus.

Conflict Resolution Process

Conflict resolution is a process where parties in conflict (i.e. employee to employee, employee to supervisor, or department to department) work in a mutual effort to understand and resolve the conflict in an appropriate and professional manner (Bell, 2002). Some employees opt for a grievance process as a means of settling conflict and interpersonal differences. However, the conflict resolution process described by Burke (1996) known as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), takes a different path--which participants often say is more satisfying than the grievance process (Bova and Philips, 2000).

Facilitation - Employee Relations staff are available to work with employees, supervisors and departments to facilitate formal or informal discussions designed to clarify issues, improve communication, repair misunderstandings and restore productivity.

Mediation - Some conflicts require a more focused and formal kind of facilitation, known as mediation. In mediation, the parties in conflict agree to meet with a trained mediator.

Each party retains decision making authority and is ultimately responsible for the outcome of the mediation. The mediator manages the process. The mediator is neutral and has no vested interest other than helping the parties work toward a mutually acceptable outcome. The mediator guides the process so the principal parties can explore issues, express feelings, discuss interests and identify possible solutions. Mediators are not judges or arbitrators. They work impartially to help both parties reach a mutually acceptable resolution to the conflict. The goals are the same as in facilitation with one exception. Once the conflict is mediated, both parties will sign a formal mediation agreement. This agreement serves as a declaration of their commitment to honor the agreement reached in the mediation and to move forward in a productive and professional way.

Successful conflict resolution begins with the awareness that conflict exists and previous efforts to ignore or address it have failed (Kindler, 1998). Ideally, this awareness takes place on both sides of the conflict. Successful resolution requires both parties to be open and honest about the conflict and be willing to negotiate in good faith.

Workplace conflicts and Employee Morale

Effectively dealing with people and their productivity is a huge part of the responsibility assigned to all managers, and employees often find their morale affected by the management style of their supervisors (World Bank, 2005). It is important for managers to realize that a one-size-fits-all approach to conflict management is inadequate for the simple reason that people are different (Hart, 2000). Different personalities respond to different management styles; getting to know individual employees will help a manager determine how best to use various management controls to motivate different employees and boost their morale even in the midst of conflicts.

This notion centers on the issue of communication. A close employee-management relationship opens the door for trust and familiarity between. Managers and their employees and resolves conflicts in the workplace amicably (Kindler, 1998).

In a study that explores the relationship between employee self-esteem, workplace conflicts and different types of management styles - referred to here as "supervisor powers" - Bora and Philips (2001) examines the uses of reverent power (power based upon the manager's attractive characteristics), expert power (power based upon the manager's expertise and knowledge), and coercive power (power based on the manager's ability to inflict aversive outcomes or punishments). While the study's hypothesis that the use of coercive power negatively affects employee morale proved inconclusive, Bora et al were able to conclude that when supervisors exercised expert or referent power, both of which require effective communication to be successful, the impact on employee self-esteem was positive. In her article on reviving staff spirit, Scott (2001) refers to another type of management style that is usually thought of negatively by employees' micromanaging. Scott argues that micromanaging is the "surest way to kill staff spirit and commitment in the midst of conflicts in an organization."

The essential problem with micro-managing is that it does the opposite of empowering employees; rather, it makes them feel as if management doesn't trust them to perform their duties skillfully or accurately and thus fuels conflicts. Managers face the challenge of keeping employees motivated and committed during even in the midst of conflicts. In his article on the effects of restructuring and downsizing on hospital staff, Burke (1996) states this concept in a nutshell: "The degree to which a facility supports its employees during conflicts directly affects staff satisfaction and wellbeing."

Managers must serve as an example and set the tone for a positive work environment, especially during a period of transformation; they need to accept any pending changes in the work environment before they can successfully convince their employees to accept them (Bennett 2001).

In order to improve employee productivity and morale, it is important for managers to allow employees to help set department or organizational goals and resolve their conflicts amicably. Employees will work harder to reach goals if they're involved in setting them (Kindler, 1998). Employees resent being left out of the loop, especially when changes are going on, which can cause them to be cynical about future endeavors, their supervisors, and the company. If kept uninformed, they may also assume the worst - which their jobs are at risk. Managers need to stress both positive and negative aspects of change and be honest about the company's future. Open communication should especially be a priority when introducing any new initiatives (Messmer 2001 b). In short, informed employees are happier employees; they function better, feel like part of the team, and adjust to change more easily. If management's goal is to maintain high employee morale within their organization, part of the process will involve empowering employees to act independently when appropriate by being able to resolve conflicts that arise from within and from outside. Giving employees the room to grow professionally - and that includes allowing them to make mistakes - will increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, thereby boosting their morale in the midst of conflicts.

Limitations of the Study

Challenges are inevitable in life and the process of carrying out this study was not complete without them.

The members of the teaching fraternity that were chosen to respond to questionnaires were suspicious of why they are being chosen while other members were being left out. To counter this, the researcher assured the respondents of confidentiality as the study findings would be used for academic purpose and to improve ways of resolving conflicts in schools. Further the researcher administered interview schedules to head teachers, and some were uneasy while responding to face to face interview on facts about the challenges they face and how they manage conflicts in schools.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Eldoret town. The town is a major centre for industrial, commercial and agricultural activities. It has a well-established infrastructure and a good geographical climate liked by many (Republic of Kenya, UasinGishu Development Plan 1997-2001). It is cosmopolitan town and teachers who teach in the Municipality come from different communities. The author employed descriptive survey design because the findings needed to be generalized over a large population. The study used both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

The target population of the study comprised head teachers, teachers who are believed to have taught in the Municipality for the past three years and are deemed to have adequate understanding of conflicts in the schools.

Eldoret Municipality was chosen because it is a cosmopolitan town with many diverse communities leaving together harmoniously. This study employed stratified sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling. The research population was grouped into strata's of head teachers, deputies', senior teachers and assistant teachers Since each member of the population had an equal and independent chance of being selected, simple random sampling technique was used to select the representative sample. Purposive sampling techniques was used as the author targeted a group of people believed to be reliable and would provide information with respect to the objectives of the study. The author, therefore, used a representative sample of 60 respondents from 40 public primary schools in the municipality.

Results and Discussion

Challenges Facinghead Teachers in Managing Conflicts in Schools

The study sought to find out the challenges facing head teachers in managing conflicts at the workplace. The study findings indicate that 51(85.0%) of the respondents cited lack of conflict resolution skills as one of the challenges facing head teachers in managing conflicts in the workplace as shown in table 4.6

Challenge	frequency	percentage
Lack of initiative from head teachers.	28	46.7%
Scarce financial resources.	17	28.3%
No support from employees.	23	38.3%
Sabotage ofhead teachers efforts by employees	46	76.7%
Forced participation in resolving conflicts.	11	18.3%
Poor management style.	33	18.3%
head teachers lack skills on conflict resolution	51	85%

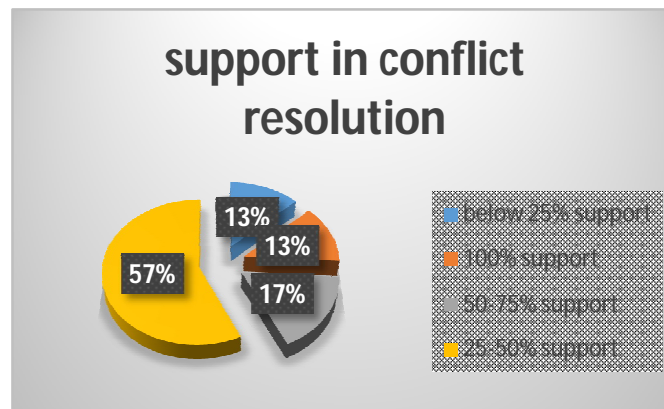
This implies that the respondents are of the view that current head teachers' managers do not possess conflict resolution skills. As such most of the conflicts in the workplace are not solved because most of the head teachers are not capable of handling such cases. Further, 46(76.7%) of the respondents sabotage of the manager's efforts by some employees was also one of the challenges facing head teachers in resolving conflicts at the workplace. The issue of sabotage can be due to the poor communication channels in place.

As such, most of the teachers feel alienated and therefore resent to any efforts by the head teachers on managing of conflicts.

Mechanisms of Managing Conflicts in Organizations

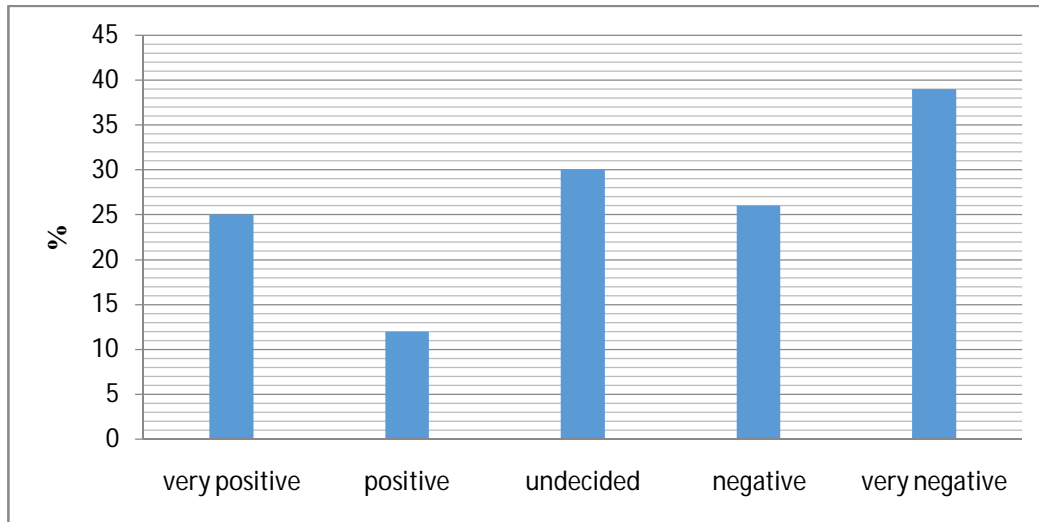
In order to forge the way forward, the researcher sought to find out the extent of the head teachers support in conflict resolution processes at the workplace. The findings indicated that 57% of the respondents said that the head teachers' gave out 25-50% support in conflict resolution process as shown.

Extent of Managers' Support in Conflict Resolution



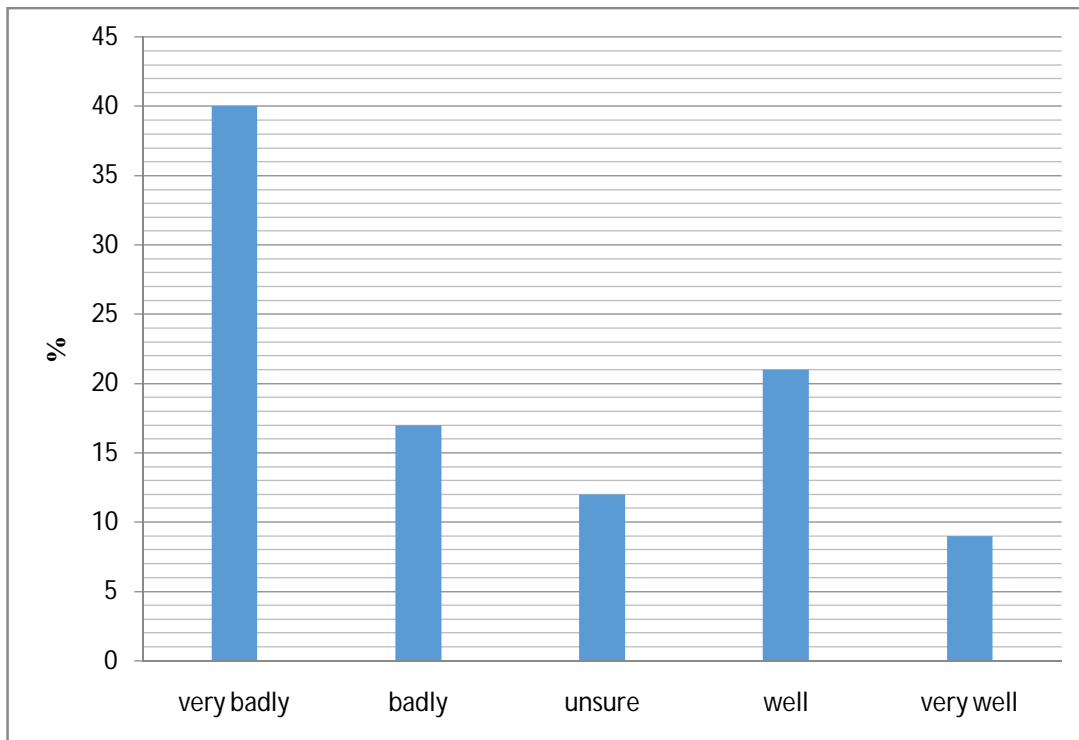
This implies that the employee respondents are of the view that the head teachers are not doing their best in managing conflicts at the schools since they do not give full support as required.

In fact, 13% of the respondents cited that the head teachers give support of below 25%. Having established this, the researcher sought to find out the attitude of the teachers towards the head teacher's role in resolving conflicts. The result of the study findings are as shown below.



A closer look at the pictorial analysis above indicated that the teachers do not have faith in their head teachers with regard to conflict resolution since they reported a very negative attitude towards their head teachers.

On establishing the attitude of the teachers towards their head teachers, the study sought to find out how well the head teachers work in resolving workplace conflicts. The study findings are shown below



As expected, if previous findings regarding the employee perception on the head teachers conflict resolution ability, the study findings indicated that teachers are of the view that the

head teachers have done badly with regard to conflict resolution at the public primary schools. This led the researcher to find out the way forward.

Recommendations

Recommendations	frequency	percentage
Head teachers should undergo training on conflict management.	44	73.3%
Head teachers to be appraised according to how well they resolve conflicts.	39	65.0%
Conflict management knowledge to be a pre-requisite on headship position promotions.	37	61.7%
There should be an all-inclusive approach to conflict management.	26	43.3%

The findings above indicated that majority 44(73.3%) of the respondents advocated for training of head teachers in conflict resolution as a step forward towards improving teacher morale. Others 39(65.0%) cited that head teachers should be appraised according to how well they resolve conflicts with 37(61.7%) claiming that conflict management knowledge should be a pre-requisite of head teachers position promotions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study findings indicated that some of the challenges facing head teacher's in conflict resolution in organizations was lack of training in conflict resolution and management in public primary schools in Eldoret municipality.

As a recommendation, the researcher would like to stress the importance of head teachers training in the conflict resolution process especially with regard to improving teacher morale despite the conflicts at the workplace. A systematic and continuing review of current and foreseeable headship training needs to provide a realistic basis upon which to plan, budget, direct, and evaluate an effective conflict resolution training program for head teachers in schools which should be assessed within the context of the schools strategic goals and to ensure teachers performance competency and development are not affected by the conflict.

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