Conflict Management in Programme Teams: *A case study based on an organisational experience within the current higher education context*

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ABSTRACT

In an organisation people are usually working together as a team. This study investigates conflict management in programme teams within the current higher education context. This study uses the major changes in higher education in the United Kingdom as the background of the research. This study was conducted through a qualitative method that was designed to investigate social phenomenon by using a case study approach based on a selected sample of two schools of Liverpool John Moores University (JMU). Data was collected by holding semi-structured interviews with key people who had been involved in managing programme teams. The results of the study showed that team leaders or team managers should be sensitive towards the team members. It was also possible to allow the team members to manage conflict themselves. Conflict was perceived either as negative or positive thing. Most of the informants tended to see it as a positive aspect for organisation development. The source of conflict was related to different opinions about teaching and learning. Conflict could also happen when there was no direct power to control the team members. Talking was considered as the better way to solve conflict since it allowed people to discuss things openly.

Keywords: conflict management, programme team, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Working in teams has been considered more effective to achieve the aims and objectives of the organisation. Everard and Morris (1990) have explained that a team is a group of people that can effectively tackle any task which it has been set up to do. 'Effectively' means that the quality of the task accomplishment is the best achievable within the time available and makes full and economic use of the resources (internal and external) available to the team. This is particularly interesting in a climate of rapid and ongoing change which the new universities in particular have witnessed since 1992. Since 1992 the United Kingdom Higher Education System has been involved in major changes. These changes have included what many commentators refer to as 'the Massification of Higher Education'. This process had affected major changes on several aspects of higher

education systems such as on academics, environmental and policy contexts in the institution.

Since 1992 the organisational systems of cycle education have unquestionably become more complex. Changes in many aspects of the universities cannot now be avoided. These changes are often followed by conflict that occur within the process of organisation development. By facing these major changes, it means that people are being involved in a process of expressing values in new ways under new situations and conditions. In this study the background of these major changes was addressed to the importance of conflict management within teams. It is reasonable to underline this view. Taylor (1999) points out that the process of noticing, naming, discussing and celebrating wrap change in values. Whatever else they might be, the outcomes of change are not going to be perfect. Planning for change always involves compromises and it needs to pay careful attention to the values underlying both visions of the future, and the plans for their achievement.

Further, this is explained by Knight and Trowler (2001) who explain that bringing about changes effectively involves addressing problems and latent conflicts that may have lain dormant or been actively avoided, sometimes for years. By considering this fact, the position of teams in the process of organisation system is very essential and needed. Changes in organisation are very important. They may be needed in order to improve the organisation performance and to get better achievement for the future. However, it should also be considered that changes might bring conflict within the change process and this condition would lead to be followed by appropriate management system to handle it. Related to the organisation development, if the better conflict management can be handled effectively, it will build a good performance to the organisation itself. This is supported by Baldridge *et al* (1978) (cited in Bush, 1995) who maintain that in a fragmented, dynamic social system, conflict is natural and not necessarily a symptom of breakdown in the academic community. In fact, conflict is a significant factor in promoting healthy organisational change.

In this study it examined the experience of one 'new university' JMU, by investigating how programme team functions in order to handle any organisational matter. Besides it is also important to know how the programme teams are managed and in particular how they deal with conflict which may be happening because of organisation development and restructuring. It can be said that during the process of restructuring, the role of teams within the organisation is very essential and needed. This is explained by Dimmock (1999) who says that restructuring has been largely responsible for the introduction of more complex organisational structures. Relating to restructuring, these new structures may necessitate more collaborative work relationships, requiring team perspectives and participative decision-making skills.

The importance of conflict management in teams is related to the effort of how to build or develop a healthy organisational climate effectively. By considering this matter, there could be discovered an effective way to manage staff's working relationship. Also

when the organisation is in the process of restructuring its management systems, a variety of organisational aspects then will be altered as well which may increase the likelihood of conflict in teams. Taylor (1999) argues that in universities the tradition is to change. Their very longevity as institutions is the most compelling evidence anyone could offer for this capacity to adapt to changing social, cultural, and political circumstances - their external environment. Those issues would be considered important and in particular also related to the way of how people within the organisation develop their working relationship and finally can support the performance of the organisation. Then, Lewis *et al* (1997) also explain that the implication for organizations is in the importance of recognizing the different types of conflict and using a variety of management styles to encourage the beneficial aspect of conflict, while discouraging any adverse aspects.

Conflict in organisations is an important factor that should be taken seriously into account along with the process of organisation development. This is reasonable because, conflict occurs in the social relationships among people within organisations. In other words, there is a closely interrelated link between conflict management and organisational development. It is also important to note that the performance of the organisation also depends on the ability to manage the conflict within the organisation as a whole. Everard and Morris (1990) suggest that conflict and frustration will often round the way in which a school, college or department is being run, 'the way things happen here'. Such conflicts have a tendency to build up in any organization and they can assume more and more importance. This is largely in agreement with Banner (1995) who maintains that schools of thought on conflict seem to focus into two "camps", namely the traditional viewpoint (in which conflict is viewed as "bad") and the modern or interactionist viewpoint (in which conflict is viewed as potentially useful to energize a company, point out problems and unify a group). Further more, Biddle and Evenden (1990) explain that conflict is not necessarily bad; from it can come some very productive outcomes. It is also a part of everyday life, where competition for resources, alternative demands, differing view-points give rise to the potential for better quality decisions and outcomes, or alternatively the playing of the zero sum game.

The important feature of organisation effectiveness is also described by Harvey and Brown (2001) who explain that one key area in the improvement of organisation effectiveness involves the relation between operating groups or departments. Since the management of conflict can determine the performance of the organisation, it is also related to the leadership aspect of the organisation. This can be explained by Hughes *et al* (1999) who say that conflict is an inevitable fact of life and an inevitable fact of leadership. This is supported by Gold and Evans (1998) who explain about the importance of conflict management for the manager. They point out that there are key issues for the manager that are prioritising; managing time; decision- making; strategic planning; managing conflict; working with difficult people; motivating; delegating and managing stress. Furthermore, Appelbaum *et al* (1999) maintain that conflict management should be considered as a very important skill for managers and as an urgent matter for their organization to deal with by

their organizations objectively in order to achieve constructive solutions. Mullins (1989) argues that conflict is based on the incompatibility of goals and arises from opposing behaviours. It can be viewed at the individual, group or organizational level. It can be related to Legge's view (1995) that conflict in organisation is inevitable due to incompatible objectives that reflect opposed class interest.

Moreover, it is important to note that pre-existing values or attitudes of the people within the organisation should be considered and managed carefully. This is highlighted by Trowler (1998) who says that the pre-existing values and attitudes of staff, both academics and others, need to be understood and addressed when considering change. Individuals and groups are far from 'empty-headed', especially those in universities. It is important to note that there may be a major tension between the changes within current higher education and its management system. Taylor (1999) explains that it has changed and adapted as the needs of students and other clients have changed, maintained its international standing in research, introduced new approaches to learning and teaching and to quality assurance, and greatly improved its cost - effectiveness. It is further explained that academics need to manage the development and the value of their skills, expertise and relationship networks. This requires a high level of personal awareness and responsibility, and an awareness of trends in the professional environment in which they are working or seek to work. Then, Harvey and Brown (2001) also explain that organisations consist of group people working together. Changes alter the way the people work together, how they relate with others, and even how they see themselves. An essential task of management is to deal with such changes. It is important to note what they further explain that a team is a group of individuals with complementary skills who depend upon one another to accomplish a common purpose or set of performance goals for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. If the relationships do not work then neither will the team. In this case, the existence of teams within an organisation is intended to make the organisation system can work effectively.

Harvey and Brown (2001) explain that each organisation is a system formed of subsystems: divisions, functions, departments, and work teams. Each work team develops its own norms, goals, and behaviour, and these forces contribute to the cohesiveness and morale of that group. When two teams are highly interdependent, misunderstanding or conflict may develop between the teams. One important thing in conflict management might be the context of communication. If the communication between individuals cannot be performed well, it tends to build a conflict. Thomas and Schmidt (1976) (cited in Hughes *et al*, 1999) explain that of these factors contributing to the level of conflict within or between groups, teams, or committees, probably the most important source of conflict is the lack of communication between parties. Also, Warner and Crosthwaite (1998) further explain about the importance of communication. They say that a well-motivated workforce is founded upon commitment and pride in the organization - effective communication provides one of the keys to this success.

In this study it would be considered to have a view of experience of one university in the UK as current higher education in managing conflict within programme teams. The main focus was that how programme teams deal with conflicts during a climate of rapid and ongoing change in the organisation. In other words, it would address its focus that when a great deal of restructuring was taking place, it might create increased conflict in teams. As has been explained previously, the changing process of organisation management systems could be also considered as restructuring process. This point can be related to Dimmock (1999) who has explained that in the process of restructuring, dilemmas also may take place. Such situations can bring about contradiction, conflict, inconsistency and paradox in the ways in which they might be conceived and approached.

METHOD

In this study, it was conducted in order to investigate the issue of conflict management in programme teams. Based on the theoretical point of views on the previous chapter, it has been explained that changes would always bring conflict within the organization. This study was undertaken by a case study which was carried out to look for information of social phenomenon. In this study, in depth-interview was carried out as the way to collect data from people by applying semi-structured interview with a set of open-ended questions. The persons that were to be interviewed were only key persons carefully chosen as key players in the management of conflict within their team. The informants were persons in position of authority, or especially expert or authoritative. The purposive, purposeful or criterion-based sampling was used to have the real purpose and objectives for the researcher of discovering, gaining insight and understanding into a particularly chosen phenomenon. Since this study was carried out to get a management view of conflict management within programme teams, it was decided only to see the result from management perspectives. The data was collected through three techniques that were organized, interpreted, and analyzed repeatedly through interactive analysis to formulate concepts and abstractions of its findings. Coding for the data was then necessary to categorise the replies and to find data order. Categorisation was required to allow comparisons between informants and to show how widespread certain feelings and attitudes might be. Related to content analysis, the informants' responses were gathered based on the questions and then grouped into a logical and orderly set of discrete categories. The answers from each question had to be written out, so that all the answers to that question could be viewed together in which they were represented in such written commentary.

RESULTS

There are several findings in this study as follows:
1. Each programme has its own way or design for the staff meeting. The main point that can be said for this study is that the staff meeting is very important in order to run the organisation or manage people within their working relationships. This is aimed to keep the communication for academic or professional purposes among staff going well. The frequency

and the kind of staff meeting might depend on the required needs within the programme. The communication also can be built through email or messages.

2. The way people build their working relationship is as a team. It might be possible to say that working in teams is very good in order to develop a harmony among people. It should be realised that the difference among members should be considered as something positive.

3. Conflict was perceived as negative and positive. It can be positive because people can move forward by voicing their conflict or voicing their experiences. It can be negative if people cannot see the other people's point of view.

4. Conflict might arise from different view points or opinions among member of organization. The members may come from different teams or departments and they might have different background of disciplines as well. The important point is to keep in mind that all staff members should work together equally as a member of the team. Team members are all interlinked and need to share information in a good way. In order to arrive on decision, it should be done throughout the process of discussion. People may discuss a matter from different point of views, ideas or opinions.

5. People would like to discuss any problem together within the team. It was also identified that this team admitted the difference among the people as something positive. The difference of view point or opinions would be solved based on a collaborative management approach. In other words, it was meant by not taking any kind of confrontation and personally. Besides, transparency within the programme teams is very important to keep working relationships healthy because it might avoid misunderstanding and conflict among members in a team.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings above, the focuses were addressed of how programme teams in one university within the current higher education context has managed conflict, what the sources of conflict within teams are, and how to identify and suggest models and approaches for conflict resolution. Those findings are related to the following explanations:

1. *Staff Meetings.*

Meeting among staff is considered as one important aspect of the organisation agenda. It becomes an essential strategy to maintain effective working relationships. In other words, staff meetings should be held in order to keep working relationship among people more effective. Staff meetings held within the programmes under study at JMU were performed for different purposes. They were all held based on the real needs or business for the programmes. The meetings seemed to be a forum for the staff to discuss something. Spencer and Pruss (1992) also describe that team meetings are the place for effective decision-making, for aiming both positive and negative views, they are a forum for debate. People in teams need 'their say' and feel involved if they not only get it, but know the channels of communication exist to relate their feelings and opinions throughout the organisation. In this case, it can be said that through the meeting it allows one's opinion to be heard. Staff meeting can be used as a forum for debate and to listen to other opinions. It can be a round table sharing. Round table sharing is making sure everybody has an opportunity to speak on a particular issue.

In this study it was also found that the key point was about communication. The communication seemed to be a very fundamental factor for team effectiveness. Communication should be performed well. As indicated earlier communication is one essential factor related to the success of the teams. It could build a harmony in the organisation if managed well. On the other hand, it might be also the source of a problem   for the teams if not managed well. As has been also identifed the most important source of conflict seems to be lack of communication. That is why the communication is considered as the key to the success for staff meetings. It can said that staff meeting is a moment   to have a chance to share information among people. It is important to say that members of the team have the same opportunity to share information. It is important to appreciate and respect what other people say about something. Team members have the same chance to speak. In other words, they should feel and realise that all individuals should work as equal as and as a member of the team. They all have the same responsibility for the success of the teams. However, meetings   serve two overall functions that are they are a vital part of communication and also a vital part of the corporate learning process. In this case, Woodcock and Francis (1981) also suggest that without   regular   meetings there is no basis for the growth of the informal relationships which characterise an effective team. Therefore, from the reality happening within the programme teams under study, it could be said that effective communication is one important factor for the success of the team.

2. *The Existence of Team.*

A team is considered as a network of relationships of people designed to build harmony in the organisation. Those people might have different skills and knowledge, but they should be able to work together for the teams. All individuals within the teams should realise that they have the same responsibility as a member of the teams. They might see a thing from different view points, but it should be focused to get its solution. Whatever the problems that could   arise among them, it would become the responsibility for the whole teams members to resolve it. This view is supported by Hackett and Martin (1993) who say that eight people   in a team are smarter than anyone   person. However, to   reach the best decision, the team members must be in an environment that encourages them to express their thoughts, ideas and experiences. This has been proved within the programme teams under study at JMU.

The existence of teams in an organisation is needed. It is very important when the organisation is in a restructuring process or still new as an organisation. In other words, managing change requires more cooperation from the people in the organisation as a whole. It has been clear to say that teams were identified as the way people build their working relationship within   the programme teams under study at JMU. It indicated that working together as teams is the norm at all programmes under study. Further Mabey and White (1993) explain that good teamwork is an essential component of effective social work delivery, and an integral ingredient of many aspects of social work practice.

3. *The Meaning of Conflict in the Programme Teams.*

Conflict is considered as something common and natural that may happen in any organisation. At JMU it has been also possible that conflict could take place on the process of its

organisational development. In other words, it can be involved within the process of managing change of its organizational systems. It has been said that conflict is a situation that can always be seen from two different points. It might be positive or negative. Besides, it could be also considered as something good or bad that all depends on how people see those points. It was also recognised that conflict could happen within the teams. However, this situation should be seen as something common to organisational life. The point here is to keep the integrity of the teams with good understanding among members of the teams themselves. This integrity demands good communication among the team members.

Conflict in the programme teams at JMU was seen as something positive and negative. Conflict could be very stimulating. The point was conflict might take people forward by discussing and having different point of views. Conflict is positive if it is well managed. However, conflict is negative if people within the teams can not manage it. It would be not useful to have conflict when people could not work together well and could not build a healthy condition in the organisation. As has been explained previously conflict might happen in any organisation and it could not be avoided. It would be more useful and important if people should perceive it wisely. Whatever the reasons, conflict management is closely related to the attempt to support the organisation development (OD). In this case, it was evident that organisation development (OD) depends on how the people build their interactions between each other in their   working   relationships. Woodcock and Francis (1981) maintain that Organisation Development (OD) may be defined as a process of change aimed at improving organisational effectiveness. Based on this study, at JMU there are different perceptions about conflict. Some people may feel that they like conflict when it happens within the organisation life. However, some do not like it at all. They would prefer to avoid conflict than create conflict. However, conflict   should be seen as one important aspect to consider in relation to the process of organisation development.

4. *Sources of Conflict in Programme Teams.*

Conflict within the process of organisation development cannot be avoided. In this case, there is interrelated link between conflict and the managing of changes within   the organisation. As has been said changes might bring about conflict. People are involved in a process of expressing values or views in new ways under new situation and condition. Knight and Trowler (2001) have discussed about this phenomenon. They maintain that bringing about changes effectively involves addressing problems and latent conflict. This issue was also found at JMU. Regarding the context of conflict, Harvey and Brown (2001) also have described that each organisation is a system formed of subsystems: division functions, department, and work teams. Each work team develops its own norms, goals, and behaviour. When two teams are highly interdependent, misunderstanding or conflict may develop between them. Moreover, it has also been explained that a team consists of a group of individuals who depend upon one another to accomplish a set of goals for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. In this case, if their working relationships do not work then neither will the team. Further Cyert (1975) (cited in Bush, 1995) explains that within any organisation conflicts tend to arise between the goals of subunits and the overall goals of the total organisation. These conflicts frequently are based on a

professional goal and that subunit desires to achieve the resources that the organisational management is prepared to allocate toward the achievement of that goal.

In this study there were identified several potential conflicts in the programme teams at JMU. They were understood as conflicts caused by different view points or opinions. They were in conflict when they were arguing about the different practices and approaches that for example they should teach through. It was possible for conflict to happen when two particular individuals within the teams were open to challenge. Then, people just got very passionate about something related to how they teach or assess their modules. In brief, it was about conflicting ideas.

Then the sources of conflict may be caused by the lack of power to the team member. This might happen when there was no responsibility for the team members. In other words, the manager of the programme teams does not have much more the control to the team members. It is because they are not fully controlled by the manager. As an example of this is when staff belong to different teams or departments and under different line managers. Numbers of team are not managed by the team leader. Besides, Heaney (2001) explains that managing conflict effectively is an important aspect of leadership and management, but it is also a key element in ensuring that change is brought about more smoothly.

5. *Conflict Management in Programme Teams.*

Conflict management is a fundamental factor when the organisation is in the restructuring process. The introduction of more complex organisational structures has possibly in itself brought about conflict if this is the case. Conflict management might be considered as one priority of managerial tasks to consider within the programme teams under study. Based on the study undertaken within the programme teams at JMU, there were a variety of explanations about how conflict was managed. One of the ways was by using the group collaboratively. The emphasis here was based on a collaborative management approach. In other words, it was meant by not taking any kind of confrontation and personally. Within the programme teams understudy, it was also stated that transparency is very important to keep working relationships healthy. Transparency might also avoid misunderstanding and conflict among members in a team. The manager or team leader could also solve the conflict situation through a one to one interview. Sometimes, it is also possible to have informal opportunities to get closer with members of the team. This can be performed within a coffee morning or lunch time. The point is how to build a positive situation to talk and try to overcome it. However, to discuss things in team might be better whenever possible.

Related to conflict management, Woodcock and Francis (1981) maintain that the team manager often influences the inputs and the conditions in which processes occur by access to other parts of the organisation. Accordingly the team manager role requires additional skills to influence others and to gain adequate resources and support. They further say that the team manager being sensitive towards team members. Their individual needs are identified and each is developed and strengthened as the work of the team continues. Outside of the team the manager is an advocate and monitors the boundaries. It can be understood that conflict management in any organisation might depend on the situation and condition which individuals in the organisation are facing. The experience of the programme teams under study at JMU provided

some important lessons about conflict management. This study of course   has just reflected the reality of conflict management in one small section of the university. However, this may be an important snapshot which could provide useful lesson for a similar organisation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the overall explanations above, the results of the study could not reflect the true picture of the real world of conflict management as a whole. However, by getting   the findings it is hoped that this study could reflect the general issues related to small investigation of confiict management in programme teams within the current higher education context. A number of general conclusions might be drawn from this study:

1. Staff meeting is an important aspect of the organisation agenda. Staff meetings are considered as the strategic moment for people within the teams to build their communication and relationships. It has been also identified that making contact through email or other kind of messages could also develop communication among members. The most important source of conflict is identified as a lack of communication. Communication among people should be performed well throughout staff meetings and other electronic means. The staff meeting is a good moment to have a chance to share information among people.

2. Working in teams has been identified as the better way for people to build their working relationships to achieve the aims or objectives of the organisation as a whole. In this case, all individuals in the teams are required to work together well. All members of the teams should work together equal as a member of the team. Those people might have different skills and knowledge, but they should be able to work together for the teams. Individuals could become members of different teams in the organisation. In other words, they might belong to the other teams from different programmes or departments. However, all individuals within the teams should realise that they have the same responsibility as a member of the teams.

3. Related to organisation development, conflict in the programme teams has been perceived either as something positive or negative. Conflict has been considered as positive thing as long as it is well managed. It is very important to listen to different aspects or different views or opinions. Disagreement can be healthy. Having different view points and philosophy of beliefs are something natural and it might keep the programme healthy. However, conflict could be also perceived as a negative thing. It could be considered as a destructive factor. It is when people have strong views and are not prepared to listen to other people this can become quite negative if not managed well.

4. The potential sources of conflicts are caused by the different view points or opinions. Conflict could happen when they were arguing about the different practices and approaches individuals should employ for teaching and learning. Conflict could happen when two particular individuals within the teams were open to challenge. It was about conflict in ideas. Conflict is more clearly likely to occur between people having different philosophy or beliefs. Another, the source of conflict is also identified when there is no direct power to control   the team members in which they are also under the control of other line managers. When you have no responsibility to team members and they are only giving   you a little bit of their times, the potential for conflict is high

and it can be bad. The restructuring process in the organisation has made various changes within the organisational systems. Those changes then have created conflicts within the systems. Conflicts could happen within the context of working relationships among people on the programme teams.

5. Conflict management has become an increasing priority for manager. Based on this study it is suggested that mainly the conflict is manage best through talking.   This makes sure that everybody's views or opinions are heard. Individuals have the same opportunity and responsibility as a member of the team. In other words, it is better to discuss thing within the team openly. Transparency is very important within the team. Transparency might avoid misunderstanding and conflict among members in a team. To avoid confrontation it is better to work collaboratively. It would be much better to use group collaboratively. It ould be much better to discuss and consult the rest of the team. It would be better to manage conflict through collaborative approach. In other words, it would be better to resolve conflict as a team rather than resolve it personally. However, in some cases an individual approach may be also required.

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