

Contingency Dynamics and Industrial Conflict Resolution In The Nigerian Health Sector: A Theoretical Approach

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ABSTRACT: There are bound to be grievances in any human space of co-habitation as not all reason alike or may agree on any particular issue on ground. The grievances when inappropriately attended to will almost always result in conflicts.

In an organizational setting, escalated grievances are known as Industrial conflict and can be resolved successfully in several ways depending on the magnitude of the grievance and weight of the conflict. Some conflicts are internal while some are on union basis; no matter which, if unresolved can lead to strike actions.

In the Nigerian health sector, conflicts have been known to result to strike actions (both internal and external) and resolution methods in use may have appeared monotonous and unsatisfactory to some factions in the sector, leading to recurring conflicts bordering on more or less the same set of issues (especially the internal conflicts).

Given this, exploration of the contingency approach is being advocated for to ensure all round inclusion, participation, dialogue and deliberation with the view to foster different and lasting outcomes in the bid to resolve conflict matters and appease conflicting factions.

KEYWORDS: Contingency dynamics, Conflict, Industrial Conflict, Conflict resolution, Nigerian Health sector, Management Theory

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I. INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Conflicts have been variously defined in relation to ‘ fights, games and debates’¹. This remains controversial. For example, some have used ‘ conflict’ to refer both to ‘ consensual’ conflicts over interests (disputants want the same thing) and to ‘ dissensual’ conflicts over values (disputants do not want the same thing)²; others, however, have called the former ‘ disputes’ that require settlement and have reserved the term ‘ conflict’ for deeper struggles over unsatisfied human needs that require resolution. We will not enter this discussion here, and are happy to use the term ‘ conflict’ to refer to the widest set of circumstances in which conflict parties perceive that they have mutually incompatible goals – although we do see a difference between conflicts, on the one hand, and sporting encounters, economic competitions and legal cases, in which the rules of contestation are not themselves called into question, on the other.

Industrial Relations deal with the worker-employee relation in any industry. Government has attempted to make Industrial Relations more healthy by enacting the Industrial Disputes Act 1947 to solve the dispute and to reduce the re-occurrence of disputes³. This in turn improves the relations. Industry in the context of this study means any systematic activity carried on by cooperation between an employer and his employee whether such workmen are employed by such employer directly or by or through any agency including a contractor for the production, supply or distribution of goods or services with an overview to satisfy human want or wishes (not being wants or wishes which are merely spiritual or religious in nature), but could be health-wise⁴.

Labor Grievances

‘Grievance’ implies dissatisfaction, or distress, or suffering or grief caused unnecessarily or illegally. In labor-management relations it is a complaint or representation made in writing as regard to a company elated matter arising from employment or service conditions, or from conditions involving unfair treatment by the employers, or from violation of any agreement or standing instructions⁵. Grievance is defined as real or

imaginary feeling of personal injustice that an employee has concerning his employment relation. Prompt redressal of grievances is a must for creating good labor-management relations and promoting efficiency at the plant level. Grievances must not be allowed to accumulate because grievances breed grievances. Piling up of grievances may create a sense of frustration, disloyalty and non-cooperation among workers who may lose interest in work and thus may affect the quality and quantity of output. This may also lead to indiscipline taking the form of increased absenteeism, go slow, and work to rule, demonstrations, violence and strikes. Proper disposal of grievance needs a serious consideration for harmonious industrial relations and maintenance of industrial peace⁶.

Employees sometimes do not know precisely what is making them dissatisfied. Their own feeling may set up mental blocks that prevent them from interpreting correctly what is happening. They may not have sufficient knowledge of human nature or of the many social forces impinging on them. Not knowing their actual grievances but still feeling dissatisfied they tends to file grievances about some-thing else. A grievance rate is usually stated in terms of, number of written grievances presented for 100 employees in one year. A typical grievance rate is 10 to 20 and any rate above or below that range might indicate a labor relations situation meriting further investigation. Method of handling grievances will affect the rate of grievance⁶.

Employees of all types and at all levels develop grievances. Grievances are not some headache, brought about by unions but may complicate the situation and cause more grievances either temporarily or permanently. Other factors affecting grievance rate are management job conditions, government's rules, general social conditions and the home environment. The principal object of any grievance system is to encourage human problems to be brought to the surface. Management can learn about them and may try corrective action. The social organization of a plant is very much like a complicated machine. Both need constant attention and frequent adjustments.

Grievances, which are expressed, whether they are presented formally or informally, are symptoms, which should be carefully studied by management to determine the real causes of this "human machine" breakdown. Almost everyone agrees that it is better to prevent fire than trying to stop them after that have started and the same philosophy applies to grievances. Grievance system helps to solve problems before they become serious. If problems are allowed to accumulate unsolved, their quantity may get so great that they may have adequate pressure "to blow off the lid of the whole section or department." A good grievance system can prevent the developments of unwanted system and keep social pressures within bounds.

A grievance system like counseling is a process of employees' emotional release of their dissatisfaction. It provides a means by which a frustrated and aggrieved employee can become aggressive and strike back at the various controls, which any group imposes, on him. Emotional release often plays an important role in individual grievance cases. Grievance procedures help to establish and maintain a work culture or way of life. Each group has its own particular way of living together, and the grievance procedure helps to develop this group culture.

A manager tends to give more care to the human aspects of his job when he knows that some of these actions are subject to challenge and review in a grievance system. He is encouraged to develop effective compromises and working relationship with his group. However that the pendulum can swing too far, a supervisor may become so aware of the grievance system that he is afraid to make decisions and hesitates to direct and discipline his men. Grievances are human problems and are to be handled in a human way. Every worker has the right to present his grievances to his employer and obtain their redressal.

The management has to see that grievances are so received and settled that the worker gets the necessary sense of satisfaction. The following are the important steps that should be taken in handling grievances⁷:

1. Define, express and describe the nature of grievance at the heart of the employee's complaint as early as possible, so that the wrong complaint may not be handled and the real grievance may not turn up again to plague the management.
2. After locating the real issue, the next step is to gather all relevant facts, about the issue, i.e. how and where it took place and the circumstances under which it transpired. Such fact gathering requires interviewing and listening to employees. This will, however, convince the employees that the management was sincere in seeing that justice is done.
3. After getting the real picture of the grievance the management must make a list of alternate solutions. If possible the suitability of this decision may be checked before taking and announcing the final decision.
4. Gather additional information for checking tentative solutions for finding out the best possible one. For this, or the past experience of the executive in similar cases maybe helpful. Company's own record of grievances, if maintained can also be helpful in this respect.
5. The decision having finally being reached should then be passed in clear unequivocal terms to the employees concerned. The ultimate decision is the tool of action.

6. Follow up the case so that it is handled satisfactorily and the trouble eliminated. It is essential to see the attitude of the Secondly; he should feel that the employees are fair in presenting their grievances, unless it is

proved otherwise. Thirdly, in handling grievances, management should display a sincere interest in the problems of employees and a constructive willingness to be of help. All executives must have confidence in themselves and should be fully aware of their responsibilities and be willing to carry these burdens. Such a positive attitude must be apparent to employees in order to gain their respect and cooperation. The manager should consider the grievance seriously and should not show a casual attitude. Grievances should be handled in terms of their total effects upon the organisation and not merely their immediate or individual effects.

In line with addressing grievances, there would need to be a form of organisational responsibility for handling grievances should be divided and shared by all levels of management and representatives of labour unions. As a good practice or procedure the employees should be required to present their grievances to their immediate superior, even if the final decision matter rests with the higher authority. This will save the supervisor from losing his importance and respect with his subordinates. After examining and investigating the matter at his level he can pass it on to the higher level with his findings and recommendation. Similarly, action can be taken by the executives at the middle level, if the matter is beyond their jurisdiction. The top-level management has the responsibility to decide cases which are having company-wide implication. In this they may be even assisted by personnel or labour officers with their advice and the information collected and maintained. The top-level management must establish the broad policies and rules, which may form the basis for handling grievances.

In some companies labour unions assume the responsibility of getting the grievances redressed, particularly at the middle and top-level management.

II. CONTINGENCY APPROACH

Management scholars now agree that there is no one best approach to make decisions, to lead, and to motivate. The contingency approach (also called situational approach), which is the hallmark of contemporary management, has replaced the simplistic “one best” approach⁸. Consider, for example, the decision theory of leadership, which states that each of the various leadership styles is appropriate depending on the situation. The theory considers two situations: the quality of the decision (i.e., the extent to which it will affect important group processes) and acceptance of the decision (i.e., the degree of commitment of employees needed for its implementation). The theory suggests that when the decision quality and acceptance are both low, the leader should use the autocratic style. On the contrary, if the decision quality and acceptance are both high, the leader should use the participative style. Therefore, it appears that effective leadership depends on matching leadership styles with situations. Failure to match these two variables leads to ineffective leadership.

Taking the lead from the contingency approach, it is possible to develop a contingency theory of conflict management. For example, in a conflict situation characterized by low decision quality and acceptance, the dominating style may be justified. In the reverse condition (high decision quality and high decision acceptance), the integrating style is the most appropriate to use.

The strategies of conflict management presented in this chapter are consistent with the contemporary leadership theories in organizations: Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory of leadership, House's (1971) path-goal theory of leadership, and Vroom and Yetton's (1973) in' decision theory of leadership. According to these theories, there is no one best style for dealing with different situations effectively. Whether a particular leadership style is appropriate or inappropriate depends on the situation. The theory of conflict management presented earlier is flexible in terms of the situations or factors to be considered in selecting and making use of a conflict style. A style is considered appropriate for a conflict situation if its use leads to effective formulation and/or solution to a problem.

III. NIGERIAN HEALTH SECTOR SITUATION

A health sector that is seen to be fair to all, that promote equity and justice would not only promote harmony among the health professionals but will enhance effective service delivery with optimal benefits to the economy and to all Nigerians. Our health system would achieve better if operation is based on trust, mutual respect and shared goals'. We urge the Federal Government to continue his change agenda, ensuring justice, equity and fair play in the Nigeria health sector in other to achieve the much desired all-inclusive growth and development.

Most of the conflict issues have been related to the 'greed' of doctors. The charges against doctors in Nigeria are wide ranging but mostly anecdotal. Going through several media opinions, articles and editorials during the 2014 NMA strike action⁹, several opinions were espoused, some of which are that;

- Doctors care only about money not about health.
- Doctors sometimes cause harm- medical negligence and errors are common but often covered up
- Doctors are poor manager/ administrators- chief medical directors (CMDs) have mismanaged many public hospitals

- Doctors are not good leaders or team players- they do not always acknowledge the contribution of other health workers.
- Doctors discriminate against other health workers and even against fellow doctors.
- Doctors obstruct reforms in the health sector- they oppose reforms that will enable other health workers attain the ' full potentials of their career' .
- Doctors are not self- critical- they blame everyone else but themselves for the mess in the health care system.
- Doctors are a cult- they collude when in trouble and protect each other.

Interestingly, many of these accusations were espoused by other health workers, especially during the period of ' strike and counter-strike actions' by Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and Joint Health Sector Union (JOHESU), some by government officials trying to wriggle out of political pressure created by the health workers strike action and a few by the public.

Although some enlighten/exposed medical specialists in Nigeria recognize and appreciate working with specialized physiotherapists, most medical doctor see themselves alone as qualified to be specialized. So many schemes and structures put in place by the medical doctors themselves have recognized some other professions as been specialist professions. For example, NHIS categorized some professions as specialized professions hence their categorization as secondary and tertiary health professionals (specialist doctors, specialist physiotherapist etc). Physiotherapists in Nigeria were refused placement at primary level under NHIS even where their role at this level is obvious for all to see, fast increasing and trend changing in other cline worldwide.

A Way Out

In order to effectively tackle industrial conflicts in the health sector, the government has to ensure that every stakeholder involved (doctors, nurse and midwives) understands that every employee or profession has a crucial role to play, and that they cannot all be rated the same because some profession play more crucial roles. For instance, Doctors are the ones that patients come to the hospitals to see mostly; therefore, the others only play assisting roles. Also, professions like medicine involves rigorous training that span for a long time, therefore, it is only fair that a higher pay is given to these set as a source of recompense for the efforts. Government also needs to bring it to the bear to others that some professions bear a much larger chunk of the brunt of the job, such issues like hazards, health risks, the demand of the tasks, and the security involved in the job indicates that every job cannot have equal pay.

Employees have the role of showing understanding that their jobs is a synergistic one; such that every part functions better with the other, but also that some of the parts are very crucial that they must be given more attention than other. For instance, the importance of the nurses can never be overemphasized as the play the assisting roles to the doctors, they could do close to everything that doctors would do, but they can never replace the doctor as his own expertise always supersedes their knowledge and experiences in most cases. The employees also needs to understand the need for human capital development, i.e. if they feel that one profession is having the day, they could easily go for more training in order to attain that level where they would earn as much pay as the other.

Management of these consistent conflicts could also rest on the hands of the top management of these health bodies. These top managements should also try to understand and make emphatic the use of contingency approach when dialogues come up as to the past and likely upcoming revolts that may still come up within the health sector. When the Chief Medical Director for instance spells out why the Government adopts the use of the contingent approach in preparing the workers conditions, other chiefs who have a direct work relationship with the CMD may also take the arguments through to their down line staff making it expedient that whomsoever wishes to be treated like doctors should be ready to go as far as the doctors would. Whomsoever would want to be treated like a Nurse must also be ready to go the mile in care and patient administration and same with other disciplines of medicine and allied practices.

More would be the role of labor unions in accepting the contingent approach and also making it as emphatic as possible through symposiums, outreaches, slogans, and other information tools. The various unions are no doubt very powerful in directing their union members. With the love of the country, man and their job at heart, these union executives and leaders could make this contingency approach sell very strongly to their members also whilst objectively protecting the interest of their workers by advising them to diversify in knowledge if anybody feels cheated in the manner of work conditions that he has to deal with. There would be nothing wrong in the Nigerian Medical Association advising its members to take a course in management as that may qualify one to be the head of the hospital or health institution irrespective of the course one undertook at first degree.

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