
Causes of Conflict Among Peer Co-Workers in a Non-Governmental Organisation in Kenya

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Abstract: Conflict is an inevitable occurrence in any human interaction setting and organisations are no exception as they are involved in conflict management on a daily basis. Conflict is often viewed as being destructive, but when managed properly it can be constructive, especially in the workplace. Conflict hinders healthy working relations between peer co-workers and the general organisational performance can be affected as well. Peer co-worker conflict is common in organisations and therefore the aim of this article was to explore the causes of conflict among peer co-workers in a non-governmental organisation in Kenya. A qualitative research approach was adopted and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data from fifteen employees of the same hierarchical level who were selected using purposive sampling. The data collected was analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis model. The findings revealed that there were various causes of conflict among peer co-workers in the organisation, and the peer co-workers were aware thereof. It was evident that conflict frequency differed among the peer co-workers with the conflict occurrences being from daily to weekly and at times monthly intervals. The findings further revealed that these conflicts hinder healthy working relationships between the peer co-workers. Therefore, the study concluded that peer co-workers should be trained and equipped with skills to aid in conflict management between themselves.

Keywords: Conflict, Peer Co-Workers, Interpersonal Conflict, Non-Governmental Organisation

1. Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable occurrence in a workplace setting. This is due to the fact that employees in an organisation interact with each other on a frequent basis and these interactions make them prone to conflict. Conflicts in the workplace can either be functional or dysfunctional [1]. Conflict is often viewed as being destructive, but when managed properly it can be constructive, especially in the workplace [2].

It has been noted that majority of workplace conflict studies investigate superior-subordinate relationships [3]. This has left a gap in the study of peer co-worker relationships which are a part of organisational conflict. According to Sias [3], peer co-worker relationships are "relationships between employees at the same hierarchical level who have no formal authority over one another". There

are three categories of peer co-worker relationships; information peer relationships which are characterised by low intimacy, low levels of self-disclosure and minimal trust, collegial peer relationships which are characterised by moderate levels of self-disclosure, moderate trust and exchange of emotional support and lastly, special peer relationships which are characterised by high levels of openness, friendship and emotional support [4].

The growth of Non-Governmental organisations has accelerated in the recent years. These organisations play an important role in the development activities of developing nations. NGO's in Kenya act as the human rights vocalists for the vulnerable population and they were founded before independence [5]. After Kenya gained its independence on 12th December, 1963, the government fronted the

establishment of not-for-profit organisations which were known as ‘harambee groups’, meaning “let us pull together” [6]. The numbers of NGO’s in the country increased during the post-colonial era and to date there are 5,929 registered NGO’s in Kenya (National survey of NGOs report 2009). Because of this rise in the number of NGOs in the country, a board was formed to streamline the registration and coordination of the organisations which was named- The Non-Governmental Organisations Coordination Board. The board estimates that the numbers of the NGOs continue to grow and this shows the importance of NGO’s to Kenya’s economy and how their organisational performance benefits the country.

2. Literature Review

Conflict is defined by Folger, Poole and Stutman [6] as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility”. It is evident that for conflict to manifest itself, people have to interact [2]. According to Nicotera [7], communication theorists have often regarded conflict as an inevitable and essential social process that leads to creativity, cohesiveness, relational growth and productivity when managed well. Baron [8] gave five elements that are overlapped in many conflict definitions given by different scholars. These are: At first, when combined, conflict includes opposing interests between individuals or groups involved in zero-sum situation. Secondly, the opposing interests must then be recognized for conflict to exist. Thirdly, conflict involves beliefs by each side that the other will thwart or has already thwarted its interests. Fourthly, it is also suggested that conflict is a process and it develops out of existing relationships between individuals or groups and reflects their past interactions and the contexts in which these took place and finally, actions by one or both sides that, in fact, produces thwarting of others’ goals.

Conflicts in organisations can emerge through various disagreements such as task allocation disagreements, disagreements between colleagues and disagreements in the on-going processes in the organisation. These forms are categorised as relationship conflicts, task conflicts and process conflicts [1]. Firstly, relationship conflicts, also known as affective conflicts occur when there is incompatibility regarding feelings and emotions towards issues or problems being solved by two interacting social entities [9]. According to Jehn and Mannix [10] these types of conflicts are based on personal issues and emotions.

Secondly, task conflicts which are alternatively known as substantive conflicts are those that occur from disagreements on “task or content issues” [9]. Jehn and Mannix [10] assert that when different viewpoints on particular tasks arise between employees task conflicts come about. Finally, process conflicts occur as a result of disagreements over how accomplishments of tasks should proceed [10]. They further state that these conflicts come about over disagreements

issues of duty and resource delegation. Once employees differ on who should do a certain task or who should bear more responsibility over a task completion, they are experiencing process conflict.

Furthermore, organisational conflict is classified as intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup conflict [9]. The study at hand focuses on interpersonal conflict which is the type of conflict that occurs among peer co-workers. Interpersonal conflict also referred to as dyadic conflict occurs between two or more people. Rahim [9] defines interpersonal conflict as “the manifestation of incompatibility, disagreement, or difference between two or more interacting individuals”. He further posits that interpersonal conflict between organisational members occurs within “the same or different hierarchical levels” [9].

2.1. Causes of Conflict in Organisations

There are various causes of conflict in organisations. Various studies have been conducted over the years to determine the causes of conflict in organisations [11-14]. Some of these are;

- (1) Poor communication- communication is the lifeblood of an organisation and therefore when there is poor communication or lack thereof this often creates conflict in organisations.
- (2) Personality differences- employees have different personalities which are attributed to individualism and these can at times cause conflicts among them.
- (3) Heavy workloads- when employees feel strained due to heavy workloads at the workplace, they tend to fault their peer co-workers and this causes conflict.
- (4) Lack of resources-when resources that are meant to be shared by employees in the workplace are scarce, animosity can arise among peer co-workers and can therefore cause conflict.
- (5) Stress-when employees are facing stress in the workplace conflict arises.
- (6) Competition in the workplace- unhealthy competition between employees can cause conflict in the workplace.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Social Exchange Theory, also known as the Communication Theory of Social Exchange. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell [15], the theory is viewed as “one of the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behaviour”. This is because the daily life of employees in the workplace can be labelled as an exchange of resources, which are weighed out by the rewards-cost balance. The theory argues that the major force that keeps and maintains interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of both parties’ self-interest. The theory further argues that interpersonal relationships can be regarded as economic exchanges where individuals strive to maximise benefits and reduce costs. Peer co-workers’ relationships are social, but how they relate with/to one another can be

compared to how economic exchanges happen/are done with the intent to maximise rewards and minimise costs.

2.3. Strengths of the Social Exchange Theory

Firstly, being a scientific theory, the Social Exchange Theory has an ability to predict how individuals in relationships maximise rewards and reduce costs. Xerri [16] asserts that this theory helps explain the social exchanges that exist between peer co-workers in the workplace. Secondly, the Social Exchange Theory is humanistic in nature thus applicable in actual human relationships. Communication between peer co-workers is unavoidable and this theory provides a systematic approach with multiple truths to explain the process. Lastly, the Social Exchange Theory makes it possible to understand the concept of relationships, how they develop and terminated. It also helps to understand that if rewards outweigh costs in a relationship, the relationship will progress but if costs outweigh the rewards in a relationship, the relationship is likely to be terminated. Peer co-worker relationships progress or diminish depending on the rewards and costs in the relationships.

2.4. Weaknesses of the Social Exchange Theory

Firstly, the Social Exchange Theory assumes relationship developments occur in a specific order but truth is relationships can either skip or repeat certain stages in the process. For example, peer co-workers can be friends one day and enemies the next and after a while friends again. Relationships exist in cycles and do not necessarily follow a hierarchical order. Secondly, weakness is that the theory tends to rest more on the economic side of exchanges and not on the social side. It explains that relationships progress only if material things, for example money, are exchanged between individuals. However, in this particular study, the researcher concentrated on the social exchanges between peer co-workers.

3. Methodology

Leedy and Ormrod [17] define research methodology as “the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project”. This was further reiterated by Kothari [18] who asserts that it is “a way to systematically solve the research problem”. He believes that it is of utmost importance to know the methodology involved in research [18].

3.1. Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative research method. Creswell [19] defines qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. This study adopted a qualitative research method because it emphasizes on the understanding of behaviour from the participants’ own point of view and as it offered an in-depth understanding of the peer co-workers in their natural working environment.

3.2. Research Design

An exploratory case study research design was adopted for this study. Yin [20] refers to a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. A case study was deemed fit as it allows researchers to concentrate on one specific program, activity or event and by thus doing so, being able to collect in-depth data [2]. This is also important as case studies allow for a deeper and richer understanding of phenomenon.

3.3. Sampling Technique

Non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, was used to select 15 participants out of the 145 employees from the organisation’s offices. This decision was based on the fact that these employees would provide sufficient information on the study and a manageable sample size was chosen considering the amount of time and resources available during the study.

3.4. Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

To achieve the objectives of this study, the data collection instrument used was semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This was deemed most appropriate to collect more personal account of events from the participants. A pilot study was conducted in a different non-governmental organisation in the area to pre-test the interview guide. To facilitate the data collection process and gaining access to the organisation, an introductory letter was obtained from the University of South Africa, enabling the research. The organisations’ headquarter offices in Eldoret, Kenya was visited and appointments booked for the face to face interviews. The face-to-face interviews were conducted on the appointed dates and before each interview, the researcher made a point of reminding the research participants of the purpose of the study. A tape recorder was used to audiotape the interviews which were helpful in the later transcription phase.

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the research findings. The steps provided by Braun and Clarke’s [21] thematic analysis model guided the researcher in the data analysis;

- (1) Familiarising yourself with the data. In this initial stage, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. The interview transcripts were then perused one by one and initial ideas and comments were noted.
- (2) Generating initial codes. The researcher then systematically coded the whole dataset.
- (3) Searching for themes. In this stage, the researcher organised similar codes into potential themes and then gathered all data for the potential themes.
- (4) Reviewing themes. In this stage, a thematic map was generated. Additionally the researcher checked if the

produced themes were in relation with the dataset and non-fitting examples were scrutinized.

- (5) Defining and naming themes. In this phase the researcher studied the themes critically, refined specifics of the themes, determined correlations between them and made propositions.
- (6) Producing the report. This was the final stage of the data analysis. The report was written up using the themes and data extracts from the study.

3.6. *Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research*

Creswell [22] states that qualitative validity is when a researcher adopts certain procedures to ensure the accuracy of findings and qualitative reliability is when the approach taken by a researcher is consistent in regards to other different researchers and other different projects. He further states that in current qualitative literature, terms such as “trustworthiness”, “authenticity” and “credibility” are used instead of validity and reliability [22]. Lincoln and Guba’s [23] seminal work provided the four constructs which were used to achieve trustworthiness in this study. These were: credibility-alternative to internal validity, transferability-alternative to external validity or generalizability, dependability- alternative to reliability and confirmability-captures the concept of objectivity.

4. Results and Discussion

All the participants chosen for the study participated in the interviews and they responded positively. The participants were asked to indicate the causes of conflicts amongst peer co-workers in the organisation. The conflict causes gathered from the findings are listed below and a discussion thereof:

4.1. *Failure to Meet Deadlines*

The findings indicated that conflict among the peer co-workers arose from disagreements over unattainable goals or the kind of approaches used to achieve certain goals. One participant mentioned that; “You see according to me, I can say failure to submit the report on time brings conflict among peer co-workers as we work with deadlines in this organisation and donors need the monthly reports on time”. It is evident from the findings that effective time management is vital to positive organisational outcomes and therefore peer co-workers need to achieve this in order to avoid conflict. These findings were similar to those of Salleh and Adulpakdee [24] and Femi [25] which found that when the peer co-workers failed to meet deadlines conflict arose.

4.2. *Limited Resources*

The study established that competition among peer co-workers for limited resources was a cause for conflict in the organisation. One participant mentioned the following; “Resources such as computers and office stationery are not always enough. This means we have to share. When others don’t want to share and give everyone an equal opportunity

of using them conflicts occur”. The study found that when a group of employees have access to resources while others do not, conflict may arise. Several studies have reported similar findings [14, 26-28].

4.3. *Task Interdependence*

The study further established task interdependence as a cause of conflict between peer co-workers in the organisation. Task interdependence refers to when accomplishment of a goal requires reliance on others to perform their tasks. One participant mentioned that; “When you agree to do an assignment with someone and to complete it within a certain timeframe and they don’t do what you agreed upon, this creates conflict in the workplace. We always have to work together to accomplish the organisation’s goals”. This scenario is quite unavoidable in organisations as peer co-workers depend on one another to accomplish their daily tasks. Similarly studies found that task interdependence was indeed a cause of conflict amongst peer co-workers in organisations [26, 29-31]. Furthermore, Omisore and Abiodun [32] state that when a person has to depend on somebody else besides himself/herself for completions of tasks, then placing blame on the co-worker becomes easier especially in cases of wrongdoing. This creates conflict between them.

4.4. *Incompatible Goals*

Another cause of conflict among peer co-workers that emerged from the study was incompatible goals. Incompatible goals arose out of the different ways in which peer co-workers were compensated. Participants mentioned that when there was talk of promotions, tension arose which led to conflicts. A participant noted the following; “We don’t all want the same thing and this leads to different levels of goals this can sometimes cause conflict among peer co-workers in our organisation”. When employee’s goals are mutually exclusive, conflicts tend to arise. This is due to the manner of compensation in the workplace. A study by Ramani and Zhimin [33] established that incompatibility of goals among peer co-workers caused conflict among them.

4.5. *Personality Differences and Communication Problems*

Personality differences were also mentioned as a cause of conflict from the study. One participant noted that; “By understanding some fundamental differences among the way people think and act, we could better understand how others see the world, this way we can reduce conflicts”. We are all created differently and for that reason people have different personalities. By peer co-workers understanding some fundamental differences in the way people think and act, they can better understand how others see the world. Knowledge of these differences as natural and normal, leads employees to expect and lessen interpersonal conflict. The participants however felt if they tried to understand and accept each other’s different personalities, they could minimize the conflict. In line with these findings was a study conducted by

Mughal and Khan [14] which reported similar findings.

Another cause of conflict that arose from the study was communication problems. Participants mentioned that at times conflict arises simply from minor, unintended communication problems. The participants felt that the lack of effective communication among them led to conflict. A study by Ongori [26] established that lack of communication was a cause of conflict in organisations. This finding was similar to a number of other studies [14, 28-31]. However, contrary to the above findings, a study conducted by Salleh and Adulpakdee [24] found that not all peer co-workers experienced communication hindrance as a cause of conflict between them.

4.6. Tribal Frictions and Language Barrier

Tribalism was mentioned by the participants as a cause of conflict among peer co-workers in the organisation. One participant said the following; "Some peer co-workers have strong tribal beliefs, which they are not willing to compromise and these beliefs can conflict with other peer co-workers, thus in the end creating conflict". The study area in Eldoret, Kenya is metropolitan but the majority of people living in the town are from a tribe known as Kalenjins. This meant that the majority of the employees in the organisation were Kalenjins. The other participants from the minority tribes felt that these tribal frictions created conflict with their Kalenjins peer co-workers. Similarly, a study by Elmagri [34] established that tribalism caused conflict among peer co-workers in organisations.

Language barrier was mentioned by the participants as a cause of conflict in the organisation. They attributed this to misunderstanding of each other due to pronunciation problems as a result of mother tongue influence. They further mentioned that these misunderstandings led to miscommunication. Gossip also arose due to the peer co-workers using different tribal languages to communicate in the workplace. These findings were similar to those of Ramani and Zhimin [33].

4.7. Level of Education and Age

Different levels of education were mentioned as a cause of conflict among peer co-workers in the organisation. One participant said the following; "It's very sad that some co-workers here in our organisation look down upon others who aren't as qualified as them, I think to me this creates conflict". In the case of this organisation, many of the employees possessed formal qualifications, but levels of education varied from A-levels to undergraduate degrees. None of the participants interviewed had a masters or a doctoral degree. However, the findings established that the peer co-workers with lower qualifications felt that their learned colleagues undermined their work and decisions because of the difference in education levels. Studies conducted by Elmagri [34] and Dwomoh, Kwarteng, Frempong and Frempong [35] established the same.

Age was also mentioned as a cause of conflict amongst the

peer co-workers in the organisation. The participants were from all age groups but the majority were young. The findings established that the younger employees felt the older employees sometimes used their age to dominate and control them. On the other hand, the older employees felt that the younger employees weren't doing their tasks the correct way because of inexperience. This finding concurred with a study conducted by Hasani, Boroujerdi, Sheikhesmaeli and Aeini [36] who found that age was indeed a cause of conflict among peer co-workers in the workplace.

4.8. Financial Matters

Financial matters were stated by some participants as a cause of conflict among peer co-workers in the organisation. One participant mentioned the following; "For me I feel like conflicts do occur due to financial reasons of borrowing money from each other and not returning it on time". However, the study found out that this was the least mentioned cause of conflict in contrast to the assumption that monetary issues form part of major causes of conflicts in an organisation. These findings were in contrast to those of a study done in Brazil which found that financial matters such as salary comparisons led to conflict between peer co-workers but not necessarily borrowing from each other [37].

4.9. Work Overload

Participants in the study noted that when there was too much work in the workplace it created conflict, especially when the work was not distributed equally. Studies have shown that work distribution in the workplace should be fair, so as to avoid conflict. For example, Yorid and Pakiza [28] found that peer co-workers with a higher workload will try to avoid extra duties and in so doing, create conflict with their colleagues who are performing the extra duties.

4.10. Lack of Clarity on Roles and Responsibilities

Participants in the study mentioned that because of lack of clarity on their specific roles and responsibilities in the organisation, this created conflict between them. This is because when there is unclear specification of roles and responsibilities to be undertaken by members of an organisation, especially peer co-workers, then conflict is inevitable. This is majorly due to ineffectiveness that in turn causes chaos in the organisation. A study by Buss [12] agrees with this finding.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored the causes of conflict in a Non-governmental organisation in Kenya. In this study, it emerged that there were indeed a number of causes of conflict among peer co-workers in the NGO. The study concluded that the causes of conflict among peer co-workers in the NGO were failure to meet deadlines, limited resources, task interdependence, incompatible goals, personality differences, language barrier and work overload among others. The study

further concluded that most of the conflict in the organisation was dysfunctional and thus impacted negatively on the peer co-workers and the organisation as a whole.

In view of the above, the study recommended that firstly, peer co-workers in the organisation were to be better educated on what conflict really was so that they could fully understand the various dimensions of conflict. This could be achieved through training workshops on conflict management. Secondly, the organisation's management could ensure that there were clear human resource policies to be followed in cases of conflict within the organisation. In this way, peer co-workers could ensure that they tackle conflicts as soon as they occur in order to manage such conflict before escalation thereof. Lastly, it was evident that better personal relationships among peer co-workers created a better working environment with less conflict therefore management could plan for team building activities to foster and enhance these relationships.

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