

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ADMINISTRATION

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VIEWPOINT

Abstract

This study examines the different types of conflicts confronting the library organization, administrators and librarians, as well as their causes and possible solutions. The authors argue that the occurrence of conflict can be less frequent if there is proper communication and the library leadership avoids selfish and ego-centric tendencies. Moreover, understanding the theories and basic elements of conflict will help librarians take on the most workable methods of resolving conflict in library organizations. This paper concludes that the task of managing library conflict is challenging but not insurmountable.

Keywords: *conflict management, library, communication, administration, librarians, leadership*

Introduction

As observed by Adomi and Anie (2006), libraries of any nature face many conflicts, but this experience can be used by library managers as a catalyst for positive changes. Managing conflicts in a library is a task that demands the attention of library administrators, because if conflicts are not handled and resolved properly, they can affect the progress a library. Thus having the skills in resolving conflicts is vital for librarians.

The challenges in managing a library are inevitable (Prytherch,1998:?). Prytherch opined that in the

current library practice, “unproductive activities will be paired away while the activities critical to the task will be strengthened and some new responsibilities will be added.” This is the trend of librarianship nowadays; leadership in librarianship is becoming more dynamic than static. Moving from pioneering to competitive stages in librarianship, as noted by Mittal (2001), it is now necessary to adapt to the new wind of change in library science in order to handle conflict more effectively. Conflict management is imperative for library managers and librarians, because as an organization, a library accommodates people of different temperaments and character.

Conceptual Clarification: What is Conflict?

Conflict has various definitions and perceptions. Abbas (2009) in citing Likert and Jane (1976) defined conflict as “the active striving for one’s own preferred outcome, which if attained, precludes the attainment by others of their own preferred outcome, thereby producing hostility” (p. 5).

The Chambers Dictionary (1998), defines conflict as “unfortunate coincidence or opposition; violent collision; to contend; to be in opposition” (p. 344). This implies that conflict breeds contention and may result in a great deal of misunderstanding among workers. Researchers and scholars describe conflict as a disagreement among groups or individuals characterized by antagonism and hostility. This is usually fuelled by the opposition of one party to another, in an attempt to reach an objective different from that of the other party. The parties normally involved in the conflict have varied sets of principles and values, thus making conflict inevitable.

In an environment such as the library, conflict can be used as a tool to learn, grow and know each other well. Librarians and library staff can learn to live harmoniously despite conflicts as long as they know how to responsibly manage these conflicts..

Nature of Conflict Occurrence in the Library

Having discussed the basic definitions of conflict, it is necessary to describe the types of conflicts that may arise in an organization as a whole and in a library in particular. The major types of conflicts that may arise in an organization include the following:

1. Interpersonal Conflict
2. Authority/Power Conflict
3. Communication Conflict
4. Intragroup Conflict

Interpersonal Conflict

This type of conflict manifest when two persons have misunderstanding in views and opinions. This may come about as a result of incompatibility or even differences in values. Adomi and Anie (2006) noted that interpersonal conflict ranks highest in the type of conflict experienced in libraries.

Authority or Power Conflict

Authority or power conflict manifests when individuals aspire or desire social recognition. Usually, this occurs in a situation where people or persons are not duly regarded in social or organizational functions as the case may be. Authority or power conflict creates a tension between the parties involved. This comes about sometimes, where titles and ranks are not “strictly” observed in the library.

Communication Conflict

This is caused as a result of poor communication or misunderstanding in a library flow of information dissemination or between individual as the case may be. Where poor or misunderstood communication is a norm, conflicts is rife or prevalent. Sometimes, the place, manner and how information is communicated can also cause conflict between those involved. Conflict arising from poor communication can have negative effect in a library setup

Intragroup Conflict

Intragroup conflict occurs among individuals within a section, unit or division in a library. The incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals lead to an intragroup conflict. The conflict normally starts from interpersonal disagreements. For instance, a unit or division’s staff in the library may have different personalities which may lead to tension or differences in views and ideas on job description or a situation where staff members of the division or unit find an opinion presented by the one presiding HOD to be erroneous.

Causes of Conflict in the Library

Stueart and Moran (2007) argued that poor communication is one of the causes conflict in a library. In situations where information is not properly understood and well managed, conflict normally results and if not properly handled can degenerate into organisational crises. .

In any progressive library organization, conflicts occur due to various reasons. Some of these reasons include selection and management of staff in the

library, constantly changing technology, shrinking budgets, outsourcing, excessive workload, and burnout (Oyedum, 2007; Pantry, 2007). Emeka (2011) also identified various sources or causes of conflicts, and these are: arrogance, growth, diversities of human temperaments, peer group differences, denial of basic rights, win-win attitude, differences in backgrounds and force change. Based on these factors, the causes of conflicts in the library can be outlined as follows:

Indecision in Leadership

Managers and librarians who lack the ability to take decision on certain matters that concern their department, might experience conflict. It is therefore the role of the library administrators to make logical decisions.

Lack of Policy Implementation and Job Description

Lack of policy implementation in a library setup can cause conflict. When policies and plans are drawn and are not implemented in a library setup, growth and development becomes slow giving rise to conflict. Where these matters are evident, one find poor leadership skills and compromise on the part of library leadership. It is the sole responsibility of library policy makers (management) to ensure that full implementation process of plans and schedules are carried out appropriately.

Poor/Bad Leadership

It is important for one to have a good knowledge of his profession. Where conflict abound, often it is due to bad leadership from the part of managers of libraries. For instance, when a librarian or head of division or unit comes late to work and wants to enforce discipline to his subordinates, this cannot work because, leadership is by example. Mentorship leader is what the workforce is looking for, to inspire a conducive working environment that guarantee good leadership.

Favouritism

Favouritism is a bad managerial practice that can result in conflict in a library. No matter how good the staff are, commendation is allowed but

favouritism should be avoided. If this is not done, conflict might arise which can affect the smooth operations of the library.

Commendation should be done based on merit and in the right way. Should any organization aspire to grow, it must show less attachment to favoritism of any type. If this is not adhered to, this could cause conflict resulting to severe effect to the whole library environment.

Disclosing Confidential Records

The librarian should be aware they are expected to keep confidential matters secret except in critical situations that disclosure becomes necessary. Nevertheless, disclosing official matters could cause many conflicts in libraries.

Effects of Conflict Management in Library Administration

If not properly handled, library conflicts can be severe and damaging to the growth and development of a library and its staff. Effects of conflict in the library are varied, ranging from stagnation, lack of interest in the job place, indecision in solving management problems, and lack of personal growth and development. More so, if a conflict is allowed to linger in the library administration for long, it breeds tension and causes lack of change from the part of the library staff.

Gulick (1937) proposed POSDCORB to stand for elements of the management process. The acronym means Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting and Budgeting. As important as these elements are to any library management system, they cannot be fully applicable in a library setup where conflict is allowed. Instead, disorder will occur frequently, thereby hampering with the success and development of the organizational goals and objectives.

Conflict Management in the Library Administration

There can never be a library set up without conflict of any sort. Ability to diffuse conflict is a skill that library managers and supervisors should imbibe and

practice. Conflict situations can be reduced to the lowest level in order to foster peace in a workplace. Figure 1 describes conflict indices in the library.

Figure 1 depicts a typical library setting. These staff work together routinely and within the circumference of their domain there bound to be conflicting scenarios resulting in either growth or undergrowth. Hence, library managers and supervisor should ensure that their leadership skills are fair and healthy to help foster development in the library setting.

Stueart and Moran (2007) suggest that library managers should realize that some degree of conflict is inevitable within any organization. Suppressing conflict is not a good practice, but rather a conflict should be discussed with a view to address it. Stueart and Moran (2007) proffered three ways of conflict resolution: expansion of interests (conflict from one level to another, from mere to severe and destructive type); involvement of self-esteem or self-image (an issue oriented conflict to one that is personal); and creation of a new reality (when conflicts create their own reality, focusing on personal incentives rather than cooperating). They also suggested a win-win solution in conflict management this is because the parties involved are given a fair disposition. Table 1 outlined some practical tips for managing conflicts in the library.

Some Practical Tips for Managing Conflicts

1. Don't let conflict situations go on. Take care of conflict as soon as possible.
2. Avoid power struggles in which someone has to win and someone has to lose.
3. Show concern for both the problem and the individuals involved.
4. Beware of projecting your own beliefs and standards onto others because this often leads to misperceptions about the motivations for others' actions.
5. Listen more than you talk; don't be dogmatic or argumentative.
6. Avoid exaggerating the problem
7. Restrain your emotions; becoming angry or upset usually adds to the problem.
8. Realize that learning to manage conflict is an investment in a better organization.

Source: Adapted from Lucile Wilson, People Skills for library Managers: A common Sense Guide for Beginners (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1996).

Good Communication

It is necessary for library managers and staff to develop good communication skills. With this practice, conflict of any type can be minimised to the lowest degree. This is consistent with the suggestion of Oyedum (2007) who stressed the potential of communication in enhancing professionalism, unity

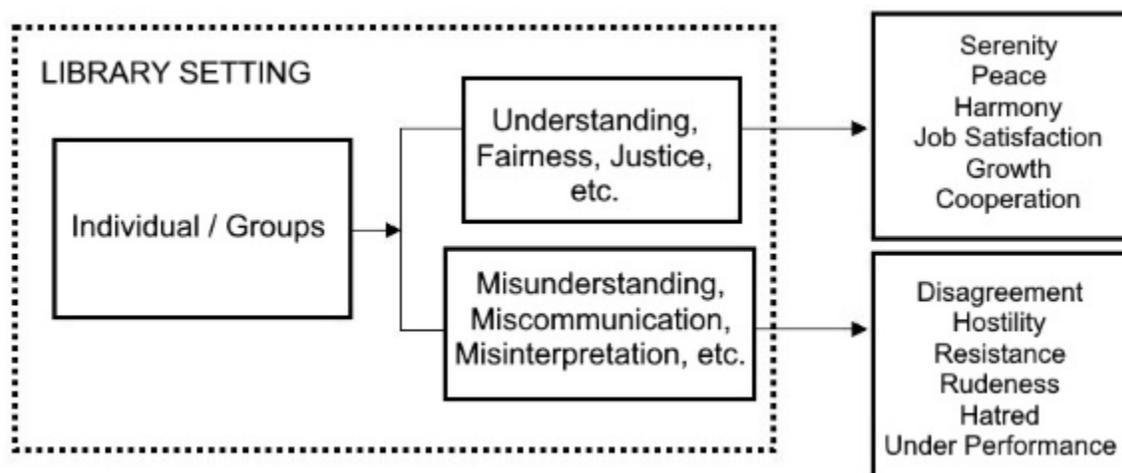


Figure 1. Understanding Conflict Situations. Joshua, 2019.

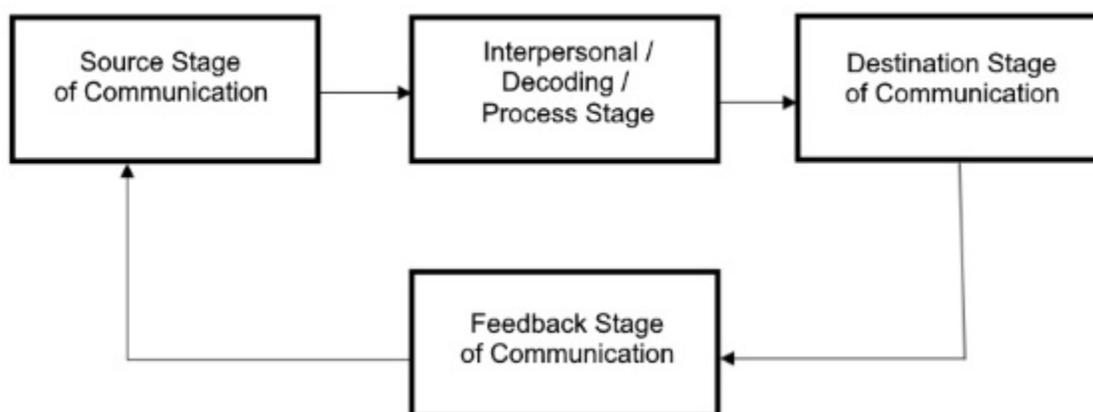


Figure 2. Communication Stages. Joshua, 2019.

and teamwork.

Stueart and Moran (2007) emphasized that communication help in feedback control system. This is vital since information is passed from one channel to another. Therefore, good communication enables the transmission of information from source to the destination. When library staff and its leadership understand the role of good communication, it would reduce conflict situations. Figure 2 show how this plan can be achieved.

Interpersonal Relationship

It is vital that good interpersonal relationship among staff be maintained in a library. A library as an organization needs teamwork to achieve its goals and objectives. Staff should strive to foster the attainment of the goals of the library rather than their personal interest and ego. This means that the staff are expected to relate and understand each another.

Flexibility (Adaptability)

Flexibility is a vital skill that every librarian should possess to be able to co-exist with other staff and be more adaptable to their environment. Lack of flexibility in the workplace causes conflict. Librarians should also be aware of the developments in the field. External challenges, such as technological developments around the world, should not pose as a threat to the operations of a library.

Conflict Management Strategies and Tools for Librarians

Stueart and Moran (2007) identified five cardinal ways of handling conflict, and these are: avoiding, compromising, competing, accommodating and collaborating. From their study of handling conflict, collaborative strategy is most widely accepted because it leads to a win-win outcome.

Berman (2019) on the other hand suggested thirteen management tools for solving conflict. The tools are:

1. Stay calm,
2. Listen to understand,
3. Accentuate the positive,
4. State your case tactfully,
5. Attack the problem, not the person,
6. Avoid the blame game,
7. Focus on the future, not the past,
8. Ask the right kind of questions,
9. Pick your battles
10. Link offers,
11. Be creative,
12. Be confident,
13. Celebrate agreement.

(Source: <https://www.mediate.com/articles/bermanlj3.cfm>).

Peters (2006) in citing Montgomery and Cook (2005) identified an array of tools to help library administrators create a positive working environment, stay on track with achieving goals and

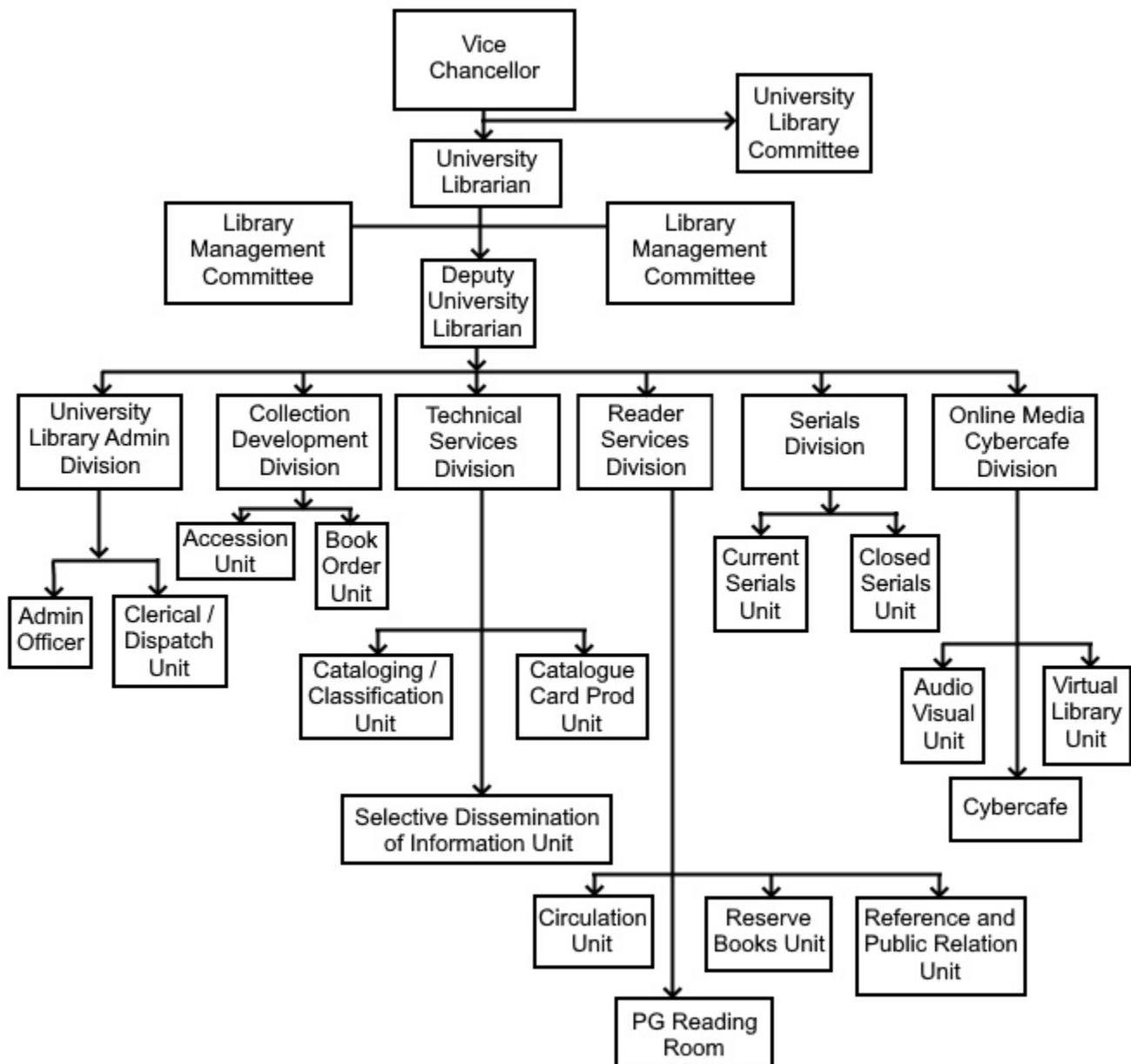


Figure 3. Ibrahim Babangida Library Organogram. Library User's Guide (2016), MAUTech Yola.

live the mission of the library. The tools are:

- Understand the roots of conflict that typically arise every day in libraries
- Anticipate and prepare to manage problems when they appear
- Use appropriate strategies to work successfully with all parties
- Choose from a variety approaches to dissipate conflict

A review by Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) Assessment, indicates that TKI is an valuation used globally in conflict handling and resolution. It specifies five strategies that can be used to address conflict situations, namely:

- accommodating (to maintain peace and conciliation),
- avoiding (a process of withdrawal from problem that triggered the conflict),
- collaborating (Looking for solution through cooperating with other parties),

- competing (involves inducing pressure on parties to achieve some goals),
- compromising (Bringing up resolution that would be accepted to all the parties involved)

(Source: <https://www.psychometrics.com/assessments/thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode/>).

It is imperative to note that the strategies involved in conflict resolution are relative to the kind and/or type of the problem. Applying these tools requires patience and some attitudinal changes. Using simple tools such as these should resolve most conflicts at whatever level in the library administration.

Library and Library Administration Organogram

Studies on library administration, theories and practice abound, and this sub-heading is centred on a conventional library setup, adopting Ibrahim Babangida Library, Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, as a prototype, is shown in the below figure.

A perusal of Figure 3 indicates every staff of the library has a designated role as specified in the organogram. This therefore means that if staff of the divisions, units, and other sections of the library would operate within their sphere of responsibilities, conflict in the library could be minimal. Library being the academic hub of any institution holds so much to offer to both academics and students. Therefore, proper job description has to be assigned to library staff to avoid collision in administering management process. It is therefore important for the leadership of the library to ensure that heads of units/departments and their subordinates operate within their jurisdiction.

Conclusion

Obviously, combating conflict in a workplace is not an easy task. Research shows that library leadership allocates over 20% of their time trying to resolve conflict in library management daily. This paper discusses types of conflict, their causes and possible remedies in a library administration.

Many library administrators suffer setbacks as a result of not properly resolving conflicts because they fail

to deal with conflicts expeditiously. Adomi and Anie (2006) suggested that library managers should deal with conflicts as soon as they arise.

It is hoped that the salient points raised in this paper will help to curtail conflict crises in library administration. It is also hoped that library management will ensure that conflicts are tackled as soon as possible. Also, power struggle must be avoided as much as possible and leaders should show concern to problems and those staff involved. Conflict, if not managed properly, can result in aggression and other unwanted consequences inside and outside of the library setting.

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