

Conflict Resolution among Law Librarians: An Imperative for Effective Service Delivery in Law Libraries in Nigeria

By

ALI, Hussaini (Principal Librarian)*
Email: ali.hussaini@nials.edu.ng
Phone No.: 08037399256

and

GABASA, Paraya (Librarian I)
Email: gparayap@yahoo.com
Phone No.: 08062094723

Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, Supreme Court of Nigeria Complex, Three Arms Zone, P.M.B. 385, Garki-Abuja

Abstract

Conflict is a situation in which two or more people's desire goals which are perceived as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both. This means that there must be at least two parties; one party in mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desire, an objective, or situation, and the other perceives the other as a barrier or threat to that goal. Conflicts are generally believed to be an inevitable phenomenon in the lives of men. It is part of the inter-relationships that exist among individuals and societies. It is therefore a natural occurrence among human beings, especially when people come together in the family or other social and political settings. This paper identifies various types of conflicts in library environment. It itemizes and explains some causes of conflicts. Methods of managing conflicts in libraries and the challenges heads of libraries face in implementing these methods are also highlighted. The paper concludes that although conflicts are natural and unavoidable, proper measures should be put in place to deal with them in libraries if effective services delivery must be achieved. Recommendations are also proffered for the way forward.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Law Librarians, Imperative, Effective Service Delivery, Law Libraries, Nigeria.

Introduction

Conflict is defined variously by different scholars. Hence it is extremely difficult to give definite definition of conflict. Conflict is “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” (Abbas, as cited in Joshua & Suleiman, 2019, p. 52). Most of the definitions, according to Eze-Jacintha, Ijeoma and Gertrude (2016) view conflict as a situation where there are two distinct groups; where these groups perceive some incompatibility between themselves. According to them, conflicts are bound to occur where there are presence of opposing viewpoints, disagreement over issues, or where there are divergence of interests, beliefs, values, ideas, or even scarce resources. When party perceives that its interest is being opposed by another, conflict is bound to occur. Simply put, conflict is a situation in which two or more individuals’ desire goals, which they both perceive as being obtainable by one or the other party, but not both.

Conflict is natural among individuals, whether at home or workplace. The library is known for team-based duties, close working quarters, and customer service, all contribute to the potential conflict among library colleagues (Holder & Lannon, 2018). Conflict is resolving and its part of way of life of people and animals alike. Where ever there are people, conflicts are unavoidable. What is important is how wisely and professionally an individual worker responds to it. Conflicts are not totally negative. They can be positive if they are targeted at correcting anomalies in the workplace. Conflict can serve as an engine of progress when handled wisely. According to Vijayakumar and Majoj (2015) conflicting views give a chance to learn more about oneself, explore views of others, and develop productive relationships. Lucero (2014) gives some functions of conflict to include: Makes organisational members more aware and able to cope with problems through discussion, promises organisational change and adaptation, strengthens relationships and heightens morale, promotes awareness of self and others, enhances personal development, encourages psychological development—it helps people become more accurate and realistic in their self-appraisals, can be stimulating and fun, and does not always have to be negative and new ideas are generated and fostered.

A law library is a collection of reference law text books, journals on law, law report, document and non-book materials on legal education and allied disciplines, housed, organised

and documented with easy retrieval system to serve the varying information needs of its clientele. It is the library set to provide legal materials to assist judicial officers, other members of the court and their clients in case of the court, law scholars and students in academic institutions and other law officers in ministries, police station and other law related bodies (Gusau, 2017, p. 2). It is also seen as the library set to provide legal materials to assist judicial officers, other members of the court and their clients in case of the court, law scholars and students in academic institution and other law officers in ministries, police station and other law definition enabled it to fall under the category of a special library (Uwaechina, 2020, p. 89).

There are different law libraries as there are different law institutions. There are academic law libraries in academic faculties and other institutions. According to Anyaegbu and Obiozor-Ekeze (2013), academic law libraries are libraries established in faculties of law in institutions of higher learning such as the university and the Nigerian Law School. There are also special and research law libraries like the library at the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. Others are private law libraries like Miyetti law firm library, and government law libraries-national, state and in some cases, local government law libraries which are within courts, agencies, and legislative bodies, to serve the legal information of their employees. Like other traditional libraries, law libraries services include: Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Current Awareness Services (CAS), indexing and abstracting, translation services, literature search, preparation of reading list, note-up services, etc.

Causes of conflict

Recent studies have shown that lack of adequate or balanced information was the most significant cause of most conflicts. Green (2017) and Gillin and Gillin (2017) have the view that conflict occurs when two individuals opine in different ways. They believe that conflict arises when individuals differ in values, opinions, needs, interests, and are unable to find a middle way. This means that parties in conflict must not be rigid in their positions. They should show some element of flexibility in order to reach a compromise. Joshua and Suleiman (2019) identify five causes of conflict in the library to include: favouritism, poor or bad leadership, disclosing official records, lack of policy implementation and job description, and indecision in leadership. Favouritism is considered a bad managerial practice. Commendations and condemnations are allowed, but should be done on merit and in the right manner. Undue favouritism leads to

avoidable conflicts in the library and the resultant effect will be inefficient service delivery. Bad leadership style arises where the leader does one thing and expects the followers to do another.

Leadership is by example. The library leader cannot be coming late to work and expects other library staff not to emulate him or her. Therefore, library leaders must demonstrate discipline to avoid conflict. Official secrets must be kept secret, especially those that concern individual staff in the library. Policies and plans made for the development of the library staff should be implemented without delay. Delay or abject refusal to implement policies that concern staff welfare like payment of over time benefits or even refusal to sign over time applications can lead to conflict in the library. Indecision is inability to take decision. Library leaders who cannot take decision on issues that need urgent attention might experience conflicts.

It is also obvious that any leader that keeps vital information that concerns his subordinates to himself or a few members of staff gives room for generation of rumours. Rumours must be generated to force information from the management. As such, library managers should make it a duty to brief their staff regularly on the affairs of the library, especially as it regards to financial matters. One of the causes of conflict is the individuals' sense of community or group. Every individual worker wants to be recon within the staff in which he/she operates. Absence of this recognition often leads to misunderstanding. Some researchers see sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (Tinuade & Fadekemi, 2015, p. 14). It must also be understood that in as much as feeling of belonging promotes harmony in a workplace, it is not uncommon to find staff that lack sense of belongingness, either because they are indoctrinated or misinformed, the authors added.

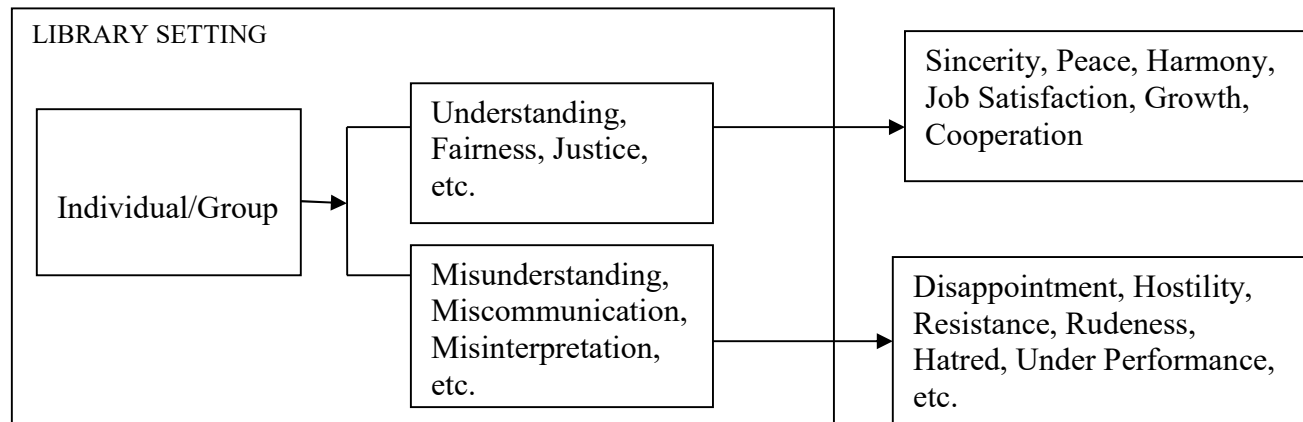
It is therefore imperative on the library leader to ensure all staff are carried along in the execution of library operations. Those that prove difficult should constantly be guided. Furthermore, beliefs form part of the reasons why some individuals involve in confrontation. Beliefs make some people confident that they are right on their opinions. Because such individuals are certain of their views, any contrary opinion is regarded confrontational. In addition, struggle over access or distribution of resources, when people engage in a struggle for power, lack of adequate information on little disagreement or misunderstanding, abject poverty and idleness are among causes of conflict identified (Haruna, as cited in Omosor, 2018, p. 5).

All the above indices can be attributed to library situation. Idleness is a common phenomenon in some government offices. In a situation where staff are not fully engaged and are allowed to roam other offices, gossips are inevitable. Gossips beget chaos and disruption of office peace. The library is a social services organisation; hence it deals with different calibre of individuals. Physical display of anger amongst library staff portrays the library staff as unserious and irresponsible. To avoid this unpleasant situation, therefore, the head of library must ensure every staff is allocated certain responsibility or, at least stick to his or her desk while waiting to be assigned responsibility. Cultural differences and inaccurate perceptions and attributions also cause conflict in workplace (Owens-Ibie, as cited in Omosor 2018, p. 4).

The following is an excerpt from Weaver-Meyers (n.d.) submission of the account of conflict that ensued between academic librarians and other members of the faculty, on an account of struggle for status:

Conflict in the workplace is always challenging. Constructive conflict associated with technological change may be stimulating and result in workplace innovation, but other conflicts can strain relations among employees, lower morale, contribute to rumour mongering, and generally create a negative climate. Certain activities are especially susceptible to conflict. Evaluation activities, for example, are frequently associated with conflict and can even lead to litigation when employee and supervisor disagree. Academic librarians with peer evaluation traditions of promotion and tenure have a built-in potential for conflict. Academic institutions most likely have policy remedies, such as an appeal system and/or an ombudsperson. However, tenure decisions that end up in appeal are likely to have already done damage to relationships and organisational climate (p. 25).

Joshua and Suleiman (2019) describe conflict in a library setting using the following diagram:



Source: Understanding conflict situation, Joshua & Suleiman, 2019. P. 54

Looking at the diagram above, two types of conflict occur in a library setting—conflict involving individuals and those involving groups. That is, conflict between one staff and another and that involving members of staff of a department or unit and another. Understanding among staff, leadership characterized by fairness and justice on the part of the head of library, brings about security, peace, harmony, job satisfaction, growth, (both of the staff and the library) and cooperation among staff. On the contrary, where there is misunderstanding, miscommunication, misinterpretation, injustice, unequal treatment/bias by head of library, the resultant effect will be hatred, hostility, rudeness, resistance in carrying out orders, under performance, etc. The former will lead to effective service delivery in the library, while the latter leads to poor service delivery.

Conflict Resolution

It is a set of processes aimed at eliminating or alleviating sources of conflict. Conflict resolution is the ability to identify and handle conflicts sensibly, fairly, and effectively (Vijayakumar & Manoj, 2015). Key words in this definition are: identify, handle, sensibly, fairly and effectively. Each of these key elements are important in the resolution of conflict whether among library professionals or elsewhere. Conflict resolution is also seen as a collaborative problem-solving, a cooperative taking together process that will lead to the selection action plans that will benefit all the parties (Heilter, as cited in Ode, 2019, p. 67).

The library leader must possess some leadership qualities that guarantee the ability to forecast or envisage conflicts, device mechanisms for dealing with them in most sensible manner, fairly and effectively. Conflicts not properly handled, or handled with bias are bound to persist. Therefore, success in handling conflicts effectively in libraries translates to unity among library staff and the ability for the library to render effective services that will benefit their clientele. Thus, having the skills in resolving conflicts is vital for librarians (Adomi & Anie, as cited in Joshua & Suleiman, 2019, p. 51). It is imperative for the library manager to get to know people as individuals in order to enable him/her recognize, utilize and acknowledge each team member's skills and abilities, which will in turn help to build trust within the library. In as much as it is important for library managers/head of libraries to respond to conflicts as soon as they arise, it is advisable that they step back and allow parties involved to settle on their own.

This can serve as a process of empowering and strengthening the morale of the staff (Holder & Lannon, 2018). The authors also suggest that cross-generational mentoring among library staff can ginger peaceful co-existence. The participants here are both mentees and mentors, learning from each other simultaneously. So, unlike the traditional mentor-mentee relationship of a senior staff mentoring a junior, the individuals need only to be from different generations and their hierarchy does not come to play. According to them, this strategy will lead to more trust in the library as staff get to know one another as individuals. This method may be difficult in African traditional setting where age seniority is taken seriously. Having the junior (by age) mentoring the senior may pose some difficulties. But by and large, if library managers can implement it, there is likelihood that it will yield positive result as suggested.

Certain steps are necessary in resolving conflicts. Such steps include: clarifying what the disagreement is, establishing a common goal for both parties, determine the barriers to the common goal, and agree on the best way to resolve the conflict (Lucero, 2014). To resolve or manage conflict therefore is to reduce the negative and destructive effect of conflict by way of working with the parties involved. The consent of the parties involved in the conflict is key to achieving desired result. But it is important for the librarian to first of all make efforts to prevent conflict by taking proactive measures. The following paragraphs illustrate studies in conflicts and conflict resolutions in different workplaces.

In a study by Lee, Hong and Avar (2015) on containing conflict: a relational approach to the study of high-involvement work practices in the health-care setting, it was revealed that relational dynamics among employees act as a mediating mechanism for establishing relationship between workplace practices and outcomes or performance. The research involving 378 patient care providers at 20 nursing homes, established that the influence of high-involvement work practices on conflict between nursing home staff and patients is mediated by task and relationship conflict among employees. What this research tends to bring to the fore is that high inclusiveness of staff in work practices influences the level of conflict between employees and between employees and their patrons. Driving this home, it can be said that engaging library staff at all times will help to reduce conflict among them, as there will no too much vacant time to gossip or discuss.

Lee, et al (2015) reported a survey conducted by Saeed, Almas, Anis-ul-Haq, & Niazi, (2014) on the relationship between leadership styles and conflict management styles among managers from different private sector manufacturing industries, while handling interpersonal conflict (managers and subordinates). The results showed that managers who perceived to exhibit more on transformational leadership style adopted integrating and obliging style of conflict management. Those who perceived to exhibit more on transactional style opted for compromising style of conflict management. Whereas, managers perceived to exhibit laissez-faire leadership style adopted avoiding style to manage conflicts with subordinates. This research showed that transformation leadership styles tend to influence conflict resolution in work place, be it industry or library.

Also, Ma, Liang, Erkus, & Tabak (2012) conducted a study on intra-organisational conflict within advertising agencies in USA. The result showed that some degree of centralization, formulation, internal volatility, and psychological distance are positively related to level of destructive conflict, whereas team spirit has an inverse relationship. The research also showed that destructive and constructive conflict each influence perceived quality of agency output. Library managers should practice decentralization of duties and discourage psychological distance among their subjects to promote interpersonal relationship that will bring about effective service delivery. Berman (2019) itemizes thirteen management tools for solving conflict. They are: staying calm; listening to understand; accentuating the positive; stating your case tactfully;

attacking the problem, not the person; avoiding the blame game; focusing on the future, not the past; asking the right kind of questions; picking your battles; linking offers; being creative; being confident and celebrating agreement.

Eze-Jacintha and Ijeoma (2016) reported strategies used in medical organisation to resolve conflict amongst their staff. Some respondents (60%) chose to grant leave on medical grounds. That is, grant medical/maternity/paternity leave, as normally if the professionals are physically and mentally fit, there will be less conflict. This shows that health issues can irritate staff and also irritate their colleagues. Prompt payment of leave and other allowances was also shown (50%) as a significant strategy for resolving conflict. These strategies can also be employed by the library. Leave allowances and other benefits should not be granted others and denied others. Also, staff that are perceived to have some need of medical leave or break should be allowed to go before they cause chaos among staff.

Major findings from their research on resolving conflict among library professionals showed that 17 (56.67 %) librarians use Exit interview (Employee willing to discuss conflicting matters when they have no further affiliation with organisation) to some extent to detect the conflict among library professionals. 60% respondents accept for some moderate extent they will allow on medical ground (18) like Medical/maternity/paternity leave to resolve the conflict as health background may leads conflicts. 16 (53.33 %) prefer negotiate and convince to a maximum extent to overcome conflicting situations. Sixteen (53.33 %) librarians apply win-win method to some extent to resolve the personal conflicts of subordinates. 14 (46.67 %) are not at all using the strategy like add humor to win over difficult subordinates to overcome the interpersonal conflict. Giving 'women's staff flexible shifts' is the top rank strategy used to resolve conflict among the library professionals.

Lucero (2014) gives some signs that the library leader must observe to ascertain whether or not his/her conflict resolution mechanism is achieving desired result. Such signs are when you begin to notice that your employees: have relaxed conversations and interactions, cooperate on tasks and projects, effective problem solving, change their word choices (for example, "them" becomes "us"), reduce their gossip and improve their tone of voice, relax their body language, keep their agreements and display a willingness to address new problems. He also posits that there are conflicts that are healthy and there are those that are damaging. Healthy conflicts

includes disagreements that are communicated in a supportive environment that foster the generation of new ideas or ways to solve problems and tension that increases awareness or sheds light on a growing workplace problem, while damaging conflicts are name calling, personal attacks, silent and withdrawn, afraid to speak up, cliques, gossip and rumors and lack of mutual respect.

Nature of Conflict Occurrence in the Library

Joshua and Suleiman (2019) give the nature of conflict that may occur in the library to include: interpersonal, authority/power conflict, communication conflict and intergroup conflict. According to them, interpersonal conflict occurs when two library staff have misunderstanding in views and opinions. This type of conflict is usually caused by incompatibility or differences in values. It is common for people to aspire for social recognition. In a situation where staff are not duly recognized in organisational functions, there is bound to be what the authors called authority or power conflict. It is important therefore, for library managers to ensure equitable distribution of functions among library staff. Sometimes is the parent organisation of the library that causes this type of conflict in the library by unduly recognizing some staff over and above others.

Communication conflict, as the name implies, is explained by the authors to mean conflict resulting from poor communication or misunderstood information amongst library staff. This can also influence the services rendered by the library negatively. Intergroup conflict occurs among staff within sections or units of the library. It is not uncommon to find group formations in the library either as a result of common interest or common function. When groups decide to protect and defend their individual interests, conflict is inevitable. Hence library managers should discourage group formations, especially those that can be detrimental to provision of effective services to clientele

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has established that the law library, like any other organisation, is not immune from conflicts arising from co-habitation of different entities coming from diverse ethnic, religious, economic, social, political and educational backgrounds. Conflict, though seen by many as unhealthy, can assume healthy dimension if the motive behind it is to bring about change and progress in the organisation. There are different causes of conflict in law library as

there are different mechanisms for resolving them. Some of these causes are personal attacks, silent and withdrawal, afraid to speak up and gossips. In order to resolve these conflicts, the head of the library should know that resolving conflict should exclusively be the responsibility of library staff. The head of the library may employ the help of external experts if the need arises. Such external experts may be the human resources of the organisation or a mediator.

Conflicts should be addressed quickly and straight to the point. Delay in resolving conflict may lead to the emergence of another conflict. Library patrons should be the focal point of conflict resolution. The library is meant to serve its patrons; hence their interests prevail. In as much as the leader may not attack any of the parties involved in conflict directly, such staff should not be covered no matter his/her status in the library or the organisation. Furthermore, one of the ways the library leader will achieve resolution without objection is to allow all parties present their grievances without interruption or attack. Interrupting or attacking a party translates to show of bias on the side of the library leader. The following recommendations may assist in resolving conflicts in the library:

Increased Communication

Some people feel aggrieved because they are not heard. The library leader should be a good listener in order to inspire trust and resolve hart feelings. Where there is poor or gap in communication, conflict is bound to arise. Communication should be in clear, simple and unambiguous language in order not to cause insinuations amongst staff. Quick in addressing problems, understanding reluctant participants, meeting with parties and modelling reasonable dialogue are some of the good communication strategies the library leader may utilize to resolve conflicts.

Avoid avenue for Unnecessary Competition

It is obvious that competition amongst staff leads to conflicts. Every staff would like to attain higher position either for monetary gains or for self-actualization, and the resources of the library is limited. The meagre resources should be shared wisely and understandably.

Ensure Well-defined Responsibility

Conflicts arise where there is no defined responsibility in relation to performance of duties. Library duties should be clearly defined and staff assigned to them. If every knows where his/her

responsibly begins and stops, there will be less hatred and harmony and understanding will prevail.

Increased Tolerance

Tolerance is a vital strategy for resolving conflict. Once library staff learn to tolerate each other or the management, conflicts will be reduced to the minimal.

Increased Involvement

Increased involvement of all staff in library activities helps to resolve conflict that may arise from lack of involvement. The head of the library should not imbibe the culture of working alone. Staff should be involved in running the affairs of the library. There should be adequate representation and delegation of duties.

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