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# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

Processes aimed at reaching agreement on objectives within or between organisations will entail dealing with people's perspectives, sensitivities, values and prejudices. Since participatory decision-making is new to most school managers, any attempt to initiate it, and to develop common objectives will encroach on people's comfort zones. Resistance to change if not properly managed will lead to conflict, and decreasing commitment and motivation. It is therefore necessary to come up with strategies to manage this conflict for effective participatory decision making. Conflict has both positive and negative outcomes which need to be managed.

**Keywords:** Conflict, participatory-decision, management, conflicts, school authorities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In any process or activity that involves several people with individual differences, there is bound to be some sort of conflict. This might be the reason why some school authorities might not be very responsive to participatory decision-making process. The truth of the matter though is that with or without implementing participatory decision-making process there is still conflicts among teachers and head teachers in schools. From a human relations perspective, conflict is natural and inevitable outcome in any group; therefore there is no need to be negative about it. What is important is how conflict is viewed by different school authorities. To those head teachers who are traditional, conflict might be considered as bad. Such a head teachers is not likely to embrace views that are against his/her line of thinking regarding a certain problem.

For head teachers and committees and associations of the interactionist view, conflict during participation by teachers would be considered as necessary for the group to perform and achieve what it has been set to achieve. These head teachers are aware that there are functional conflicts that aim at supporting the goals of the school and its performance. The same applies to process conflicts where teachers as participants would be conflicting over how to reach their target as a school.



A head teacher and SDCs and SDAs who are transformative and who support teacher participation should be able to separate functional and dysfunctional conflict. The reason is, if dysfunctional conflict is allowed during teacher participation, the group will be prevented from achieving pre-set goals. Usually dysfunctional conflict is based on inter personal relationships which have nothing to do with the interests of the school community.

Mullins (2010) analyses organizational conflict by arguing that it is not necessarily a bad thing because it can be viewed as a constructive force in certain situations. Some leaders can welcome and encourage it especially when there is need to effect incremental improvement in organisational functioning and in the decision-making process. Organisational conflict is also viewed as an agent for evolution and for internal and external exchange. Linking these observations to participative decision-making process, one would agree that the process is a form of evolution from what used to be the status quo in school management. The current state was ushered in by the decentralisation policy adopted by the Zimbabwean government that empowered SDCs and SDAs through active participating in how their schools were to be run.

Kreitner (2010: 98) categorises organisational conflict into two groups in terms of outcomes. The argument is that there are positive outcomes and negative outcomes of conflict in organisations as shown below:

### 1.1 Positive outcomes of conflict

Conflict is considered as having positive outcomes when it leads to the following:

- Production of better ideas;
- When people within the organisation are forced to search for new approaches to finding solutions to problems facing them;
- When the conflict results in long-standing problems being brought to the surface so as to be resolved;
- When conflict results in long-standing problems being brought to the surface so as to be resolved;
- When conflict facilitates clarification of views among members of the organisation;
- If the conflict leads to stimulation of interest and creativity;
- When it provides a chance for people to test their capabilities of capacities;

The above observations about positive conflict within the participatory decision making process can justify active participation of teachers in school development committees and school development associations. The indication is that there should never be zero tolerance of conflict in school development committees and school development associations because that would mean that the school would cease to be considered as progressive or a learning organisation.

Mullins (2010) suggests that leaders of organisations need to be aware of the several sources of conflict in their particular organisations. One of the sources is difference in perception especially on value judgements. It is important that all members of the school organisation share the same values with regard to vision and mission statement of the school. To achieve this there is need for communication and education so that all the members, as they participate, do not lose sight of the common values.

Departmentalism and specialisation can also be a source of conflict. As teachers participate, they should not be made to feel that, they are doing it for the infant department or for the junior levels. This approach erodes the sense of oneness and is likely to lead to unhealthy conflict thus resulting in a divided school.

Another source of organisational conflict lies in inequitable treatment or inequitable distribution of resources. Unjust treatment can be sensed in how the school management rewards or punishes people during the period of participation in whatever activity they participate in. there is always need to encourage, support and praise all teachers as they show dedication and exert maximum effort in the various activities they might be participating in.



Last but not least, another source of conflict might be the entrance of a new member into the school who might be called upon to participate in a certain activity. This can be viewed as violation of territory since people tend to be attached to their 'own' territories. The presence of a 'stranger' might create feelings of resentment. It is always wise for the head teacher as advisor to the school development committee or association to explain and justify the need to incorporate new arrivals in the decision making process for the benefit of the school.

## 1.2 Negative outcomes of conflict

While it has been argued that organisational conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, Mullins (2010) says that members of SDCs and SDAs need to be concerned when conflict has the following outcomes:

- Some people feeling defeated and demeaned;
- Increased distances between people;
- Development of a climate of mistrust and suspicion;
- Individuals and groups concentrating on their narrow interests;
- Development of resistance rather than teamwork;

The above may be indications to the head teacher and SDC or SDA members that perhaps, the levels or nature of conflict would have reached a point where it ceases to be productive to the school. Practical examples are situations where one finds that a teacher opts to be transferred to a school where one hopes that one's talents or capabilities are acknowledged and utilised. Areas of frustrations are usually extracurricular activities. Teachers who are talented in certain discipline but are not recognised might feel demeaned and develop negative attitudes towards teamwork because they might not be considering themselves to be within the 'in-group' but the 'out-group'. This scenario does not contribute towards successful participatory decision-making. The distance created by the conflict would automatically lead to a climate of mistrust and suspicion. This would result in some teachers opting to participate in their own narrow interests which have nothing to do with the development of the school.

The discussion of conflict resolution in organisations served to show that schools authorities have to accept that it is bound to be there but when it leads to negative outcomes it might be a sign that teachers might not be happy and satisfied with their participation as members of the school organisation. The discussion also leads to the need for proper management of diversity in schools for the benefit of successful participative decision making.

## 1.3 Managing diversity in participatory decision-making

All organisations including schools are characterised by diversity among members of the organisation. This being the case, it is vital for head teachers and members of school committee and associations to be aware if the diversity in teachers so that they are in a position to manage it in such a way that, the way they handle it does not negatively affect teacher efficacy in participatory decision-making.

Clegg et al (2008) define diversity as a variety in geography, culture, gender, spirituality, language, disability and age. In support of this definition, Kreitner and Kinicki (2010) also postulate that diversity refers to the mosaic of people who bring a variety of backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values and beliefs as assets to the group and organisations with which they interact.

The two definitions are agreeable to the idea that organisations are made up of members who are different in many aspects but whose interests should be catered for to ensure that they work harmoniously as a team towards achieving other goals of the organisation. There is need for the school management to accommodate the differences in a way that turns up to be an advantage to the school. In other words, head teachers and SDCs and SDAs should be in a position to identify opportunities in the diversity that exists among



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teachers and exploit them for the sustainable growth and development of the school and teacher-efficacy. Teachers too would benefit from acknowledging diversity and be prepared to develop and be developed by others.

Bulin (2001) summarises the importance issue of diversity management in participatory decision-making by saying that people can never be made to be one in the true sense. They are as different as each part of a mosaic is. The individual differences have to be respected as teachers engage in participatory decision-making. Though teachers might be different, they are all capable of contributing to a larger picture which is the team.

Diversity should not be shunned because it applies to everyone and covers everyone who has positive interest in the school. It is viewed positively, it becomes acceptable and desirous. Last but not least important, Smit et al (Ibid) advocates for the use of the platinum rule when dealing with diversity that says, "Treat others the way they want to be treated." To follow this rule is to give chance to the success of participatory decision-making and teacher-efficacy in schools. Against this backdrop of diversity, it is therefore important for school administrators to know when to utilise the decision-making strategy.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In any process or activity that involves several people with individual differences, there is bound to be some sort of conflict. Conflict is inevitable in participatory decision-making process and it should be addressed squarely and not swept under the carpet or denied.

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