Hegelian Dialectics as an Approach to Organisational Conflict Management

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Abstract

This work titled Hegelian dialectics as an approach to organisational conflict management, aims at providing a better understanding of organisational conflict and thereby fashioning a more effective approach to its management. Hegel believes that human history is merely a series of constant philosophical conflicts. He believed that the highest state of mankind can only be attained through constant ideological conflict and resolution. This reasoning throws a challenge to the traditional approach of conflict management which sees conflict as evil and something to be avoided. Hegel believes conflict is a necessary prerequisite for self-realization. This reasoning when applied to organisational conflict management would mean that a different approach to conflict management would need to be adopted. Conflict here would no longer be seen as an evil to be avoided but as a production force that would lift the organisation forward. This better view of conflict would help spur the organisation up, thus instigating a better managerial approach to its resolution. When conflict is seen this way, conflicting ideas would be seen as an opportunity to build a better idea (synthesis) for the growth and development of the organisation.

Keywords: dialectics, organisational conflict, resolution, Hegel.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been a part of organisation from its inception till date. This fact has necessitated various attempts at conflict management. However, most attempts at conflict management have been based on the assumption that all conflict was bad and would always be counterproductive to organisational goals (Bisong et al., 2016; Chima et al., 2018). Conflict management was therefore seen as synonymous with conflict avoidance. Most managers viewed conflict as something they must eliminate from their organisation. This avoidance approach to conflict management usually leaves the people experiencing this conflict with essentially only one outcome: a win-lose scenario. In such cases, the loser would feel slighted and this, in turn, would lead to renewed belligerence. This avoidance approach to conflict management was prevalent during the latter part of the nineteenth century and is still evident in some organisations today.

Nevertheless, conflict avoidance is not a satisfactory strategy for dealing with most conflict (Adoga & Alobo 2015; Edet 2019). Conflict avoidance usually leaves those people who are being avoided feeling as if they are being neglected. Also, conflict avoidance usually fails to reconcile the perceived differences that originally caused the conflict. As a result, the original basis for the conflict continues unabated, held in check only temporarily until another confrontation arises to set the conflict into motion again. In line with this, this paper wishes to explore the ideas of the German philosopher – Hegel, with the hope of fashioning out a better approach to organisational conflict and its management.

Hegel dialectics shows that conflict could act like a stimulus for progress and growth of an organisation. Thus we do not only need to accept conflict; we also

need to encourage it. Hegel dialectics suggests that a conflict-free, harmonious, and cooperative organisation tends to become stagnant and non-responsive to market change and advancement. Therefore, it is necessary for managers to interject a minimum level of conflict to maintain an optimal level of organisational performance. Shelton and Darling (2004) support our thesis by averring that conflict is a necessary condition for both individual and organisational progression. They encourage managers to "embrace conflict and use it for continuous transformation".

2. AN OVERVIEW OF ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT

Conflicts in organisations could be categorized into several groups, there include:

1. Personal conflict: personal conflicts refer "to an individual's inner workings and personality problems" (Argyris 1957). Causes of personality conflict ranges from anxiety, frustration, incompetence, role conflict etc.
2. Inter-personal conflict: this is a conflict between two or more individuals in an organisation. This is often caused by completion for resources and positions.
3. Intra-group conflict: this is conflict that arises between members of the same group within an organisation. This arises in groups because of the scarcity of freedom, position and resources. People who value independence tend to resist the need for interdependence and to some extent, conformity within a group.
4. Inter-group Conflict: this is conflict that occurs between two groups in the same organization (Ushie & Odey 2018; Odey & Ushie 2018). Inter-group conflict occurs in two general forms. Horizontal strain involves competition between functions. For example, sales versus production department, research and development versus engineering department, purchasing versus legal, line versus staff and so on. Vertical strain or conflict involves competition between hierarchical levels. For example, union versus management, foremen versus middle management, shop workers versus foremen (No Author. "Different approaches to problem can adversely affect group performance." http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20 130508151300AANUcbI). Causes of this conflict include disputes of right and disputes of interest.

These conflicts stem from some factors; Daff (1992) list out some of these factors that create organisational conflict to include:

a. Scarce Resources: resources may include; money, supply, people, or information. Often organisational units are in competition for scarce or declining resources. This creates a situation where conflict is inevitable.
b. Jurisdictional Ambiguities: conflicts may also surface when job boundaries and task responsibilities are unclear. Individuals may disagree about who has the responsibility for tasks and resources.
c. Personality Clashes: a personality conflict emerges when two people simply do not get along or do not view things similarly. Personality tensions are caused by differences in personality, attitudes, values and beliefs.
d. Power and Status Difference: power and status conflict may occur when one individual has questionable influence over another. People might engage in conflict to increase their power or status in an organisation.
e. Goal Differences: conflict may occur because people are pursuing different goals. Goals conflicts in individual work unit are a natural part of any organisation.
f. Communication Breakdown: communication based barriers may be derived from differences in speaking styles, writing styles and non verbal communication styles. These stylistic differences frequently distort the communication process. Faulty communication leads to misperception and misunderstanding which can invariably lead to long-standing conflict.

Conflict when not well managed could produce dysfunctional effects which include:

a. Diverts energy from work
b. Threatens psychological well-being
c. Wastes resources
d. Creates a negative organisational climate
e. Interferes with communication
f. Breaks down group cohesion
g. Increases hostility and aggressive behaviour
h. Leads to an increase in politics
i. Leads group to stereotype each other
j. Leads to infighting
k. Reduces productivity
l. Reduces the organisation's capacity to compete in the market place

m. Leads to the eventual collapse of the organisation (Inyang 2008).

However, when conflict is well managed, functional results could be reaped. According to Sims (2002), the functional side of conflict include:

a. Leads to new ideas
b. Stimulates creativity and innovation
c. Motivates change and consideration of new approaches and ideas
d. Promotes organisational vitality
e. Helps individuals and groups establish identities
f. Increases loyalty and performance within each of the groups in conflict
g. Serves as safety valve to indicate problems by bringing them out into the open.

3. OVERVIEW OF HEGEL'S DIALECTICS

Before the emergence of Hegel, the concept – *dialectic,* referred to the process of argument and refutation through which philosophers sought to unravel the truth. Socrates as evident in the dialogues of Plato was the first to used it (Hamidah 2020). In the dialogues, Socrates saw himself as a midwife who helps individual to give birth to the knowledge they are already pregnant with. In the dialogues as presented by Plato, one person would advance a proposition and Socrates would refute it and give arguments why that proposition is wrong, thereby, clearing the way for a better and more convincing argument to take its place; the process would continue until the person get at the truth. Rene Descartes also used the dialectic method to arrive at his famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) proposition. Dialectical reasoning, before Hegel therefore, was meant to clear away misconceptions to arrive at first principles (basic truth), that is basic and fundamental, upon which certain and indubitable knowledge could be built.

Hegel however, used the dialectic for a different purpose than arriving at first principles (Keikhaee 2020). To grasps how Hegel sees the dialectics, we need to first understand that Hegel like Immanuel Kant was an idealist. Like Kant, Hegel believed that we do not perceive the world or anything in it directly, all the mind could have access to ideas of the world - images, perceptions, concepts. Hegel's idealism however, differs from Kant's in two ways. Hegel held that the ideas we have of the world are totally shaped by the ideas of people around us; this is accomplished through the language, the traditions and the cultural and religious institutions of our society. These collective consciousness of a given society, which shapes the ideas and consciousness of each individual, Hegel calls 'spirit' (Hegel *http://www.sparknotes.com/…osophy/hegel/themes.html).*

Another way that Hegel differed from Kant is that he sees this Spirit as evolving according to the same manner that ideas evolve in an argument. This evolving of the spirit, he calls Dialectics. The dialectic movement proceeds with a thesis, which is an idea or proposition about reality. Every thesis contains an inherent contradiction, which thus gives rise to its antithesis, which is a proposition that contradicts the thesis. Finally, the thesis and antithesis are reconciled into a synthesis, which is a new idea combining elements of both. This synthesis is at a higher level of truth than the first two views. The synthesis which is itself a thesis, would also encounter its own opposite resulting in another contradiction giving rise to an antithesis, which would be reconciled to form a synthesis, the process continues until the absolute spirit is manifested. This evolving spirit according to Hegel does not exist from the earliest moments of human history but is instead a modern phenomenon towards which humanity had to evolve.

According to the process Hegel puts up in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1998), human consciousness in attempting to relate with the world starts at the point of trying to grasp objects through sensation from outside and from here moves on to more sophisticated ways of relating to the external world, until it finally reaches the level of Spirit. At this stage, consciousness realizes that individuals are bound to other individuals in a communal consciousness. Here individuals understand that consciousness of an object necessarily implies consciousness of a subject. In other words, human beings are not only conscious of objects but also self-conscious. Hegel takes this view a step further to suggest that self-consciousness involves not only a subject and an object but other subjects as well. Implying that, true self-consciousness is a social process and involves a moment of radical identification with another consciousness, a taking on of another's view of the world to obtain a self-image (Hegel *http://www.sparknotes.com/…osophy/hegel/themes.html)*. Consciousness of self is always consciousness of the other (Ekurii et al 2019; Essien 2020). In relationships of inequality and dependence, the subordinate partner, or the slave, is always conscious of his subordinate status in the eyes of the other, while the independent partner, the lord, enjoys the freedom of negating

consciousness of the subordinate other who is unessential to him. However, in doing so, the lord is uneasy because he has negated a consciousness with which he has radically identified in order to assure himself of his independent and free status. In short, he feels guilty for denying the moment of mutual identification and sameness to preserve his sense of independence and superiority.

4. MANAGEMENT OF ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT USING IDEAS FROM HEGELIAN DIALECTICS

Hegel's theory is basically that human history is merely a series of constant philosophical conflicts. He believed that the highest state of mankind can only be attained through constant ideological conflict and resolution. When the dialectic moves to the next level, it is invariably moving to a more perfect level. The rules of the dialectic means mankind can only reach its highest spiritual consciousness through endless self-perpetuating struggle between ideals, and the eventual synthesizing of all opposites. Hegel's dialectic holds that all conflict takes man to the next spiritual level. It implies that constant conflict and continual merging of opposite ideologies, will lead humans into final perfection.

Hegel dialectics therefore, sees conflict in positive light. It sees it as a necessary force for consciousness to move to a higher state (Cho 2020). Without conflict therefore, there would be no progress according to Hegel dialectics. When this reasoning is translated into the organisation, it would be clear that Hegel would see organisational conflict as a necessary driving force for organisational progress. This is not in tandem with the dysfunctional view of conflict which sees it as an evil that needs to be avoided. Hegel would see it as a stimulus for growth. It is conflict that produces an antithesis that is eventually resolved to a higher level of truth – the synthesis. Conflict in organisation therefore would produce an antithesis, which would be later resolved into a synthesis – higher productivity for the organisation or faster achievement of goals and objectives (Dickman 2020). In the eyes of Hegel therefore, organisational conflict is a production force. It is a force that can stimulate members of the organisation to increase their knowledge and skills, and also their contribution to organisational innovation and productivity. Unlike the dysfunctional position (the position that considers conflict as evil), an approach from the Hegelian perspective sees the key to organisation success as laying not in its structure, clarity and orderliness, but in creativity, responsiveness and adaptability. This creativity would be engineered through a conflict which would provoke a response and the response (solution) would be adapted by the organisation. This adaptation would lead to the growth and development of the organisation. The successful organisation then needs conflict so that diverging views can be put on the table, and new ways of doing things can be created; it also needs conflict because it sometimes serves as feedback on how things are going in the organisation. Even personality conflict carries information to the manager about what is not working in the organisation, affording him the opportunity to improve the organisation. An organisation without conflict therefore, would be stagnant. A manager who rejoices that his/her organisation is without conflict is according to this Hegelian approach ignorant of the beneficial consequence of conflict. Conflict should be welcome in the organisation because of its catalytic tendencies.

If managers subscribe to the functional view of conflict as could be gleaned from Hegel's system, and recognise that each conflict situation is an opportunity for improvement, they would then shift their view of conflict. Thus rather than trying to eliminate conflict, or suppress its symptoms, the task of managers becomes, managing conflict so that it enhances people and organisations, rather than destroying people and organisations. So the task of managers now is to manage conflict to avoid the negative consequences, where conflict is allowed to eat away at team cohesiveness and productivity.

The best way to manage conflict to achieve organisational effectiveness is through collaborative behaviour, where the conflicting parties pool their creative energies to find innovative answers to old problems. Collaboration as a conflict management tool, represents an attempt to channel conflict in a positive direction, thus enabling the manager to use conflict as a tool to resolve otherwise incompatible objectives within the organization (Ilozobhie & Egu 2014). This collaborative mode of conflict management is what Hegel's dialectical system advocates for. Hegel believes that the presence of the external other is essential for self-consciousness – it is only when the self recognises consciousness in others that self-consciousness is attained. Absolute knowledge, or Spirit, cannot come to be, without first a self-consciousness recognizing another's self-consciousness. This implies that without affirmation

of the other, the self would not be affirmed. It also implies that without recognition of the other members of one's organisation, self-consciousness would not be attained. When this message is taken into organisational conflict management, a lot of functional effects would be achieved. Hegel's theory therefore would demand that the managers of organisation recognise the ideas and views of their subordinates as important and also teach the subordinates to see others in the organisation as very important to the realization of the self. The objectification of the self would only occur when there is mutual recognition amongst members in the organisation. It is therefore through this mutual recognition of ideas and viewpoint that conflict in organisation could be steered to achieve its functional effects. It is through mutual recognition that the conflicting parties could pool their resources together to fashion out the best way to move the organisation forward. When one's idea is being asserted at the expense of others, then conflict would continue unabated but when there is the mutual assertion of the other parties ideas, there would be collaboration of ideas which will give birth to a synthesis – organisational growth. Avoidance of conflicting ideas of others as is sometimes the case in some organisation according to Hegel's theory would not promote self-consciousness. When each party chooses to ignore the other, no self-consciousness forms and each views the other merely as an animated object rather than an equivalent subject (*http://en.wikipedia.org/…er–slave_dialectic).* This is because primitive consciousness sees its own self in the other (Hegel 1977). The recognition of the other therefore, gives each of them the objective truth and self-certainty required for self-consciousness. Recognition of each other idea gives each party a better view of organisational life.

5. CONCLUSION

Hegel dialectic system provides organisations all round the world with a better way to look at conflict. Conflict for Hegel is not a destructive mechanism that should be avoided. Rather it is a functional force that could propel the organisation to greater heights. Conflict provokes changes in the organisation that could lead to increase in organisational efficiency and effectiveness. Since conflict could have functional effects if managed properly, then the traditional management approach of conflict through avoidance would need to give way to a better approach which

employs Hegelian ideas in the dialectics. Collaborative approach to conflict management is advocated for in this work. This approach involves mutual recognition and assertion of each party's viewpoints. It is through this mutual recognition and appreciation of each other, that both parties could employ their talents to the formation of a better strategy for organisational management. But when both parties begin to annihilate the ideas of the others, it would be indirectly doing a disservice to the self. Because it is from the recognition of the other's idea that one's own ideas could be affirmed and recognised.

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