
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESS: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY LOCATED IN THE SOUTH EAST

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine post conflict within at university located in the South East of the United States after it was found that various leaders were misappropriating monetary resources and charged with embezzlement. The aim of this research was to provide the latest literature on the causes of conflict within an organization and its impact on the organization as a whole. The researcher found that although the university established an ombudsman position to mediate ongoing conflict, it still lacked a much needed conflict management system that is supported by top leadership. The researcher suggested a need to address organizational culture, leadership and employee engagement.

Keywords: Conflict, Organizational Conflict, Employee Engagement, Leadership, Values, Ombudsman

Introduction

Conflict is a natural occurrence that has become a normal part of life and can be provoked by many opposing elements. Conflicts are unavoidable (Lieberman, Levy, & Segal, 2009), normal and are a common characteristic in mankind (Marques, Ferreira, Duarte, Baliero, & Mandetta, 2015, p. 1184). They are a fundamental and inescapable part of life that exist in the workplace no matter how successful an organization is (Lieberman, Levy, & Segal, 2009). Marques et al. (2015) emphasize that conflict should not be evaded nor eradicated, but handled effectively. This case study will examine organizational conflict relating to past employee misconduct and its impact in relation to the mission statement of a University located in the South East. For the purpose of this case study, the researcher will use a pseudonym name of UofSE, as the name for the case studied university. According to the UofSE's mission statement, the institution strives to educate and attend to its community through instructing a multicultural undergraduate, graduation and qualified students in order to mature engaged populations, leaders, intellectuals, practicing and applying research that will increase the quality of life for domestic and international communities." (UofSE, 2015).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore employee misconduct involving embezzlement at the UofSE within the last decade involving high-ranking staff members. This study analyzes the aftermath of the aforementioned misconduct that resulted in conflict management strategies being implemented to address the lingering emotional aspect caused by past wrongdoing of its leaders. The following wrongdoing by high-ranking employees at UofSE consisted of the following allegations and criminal charges:

- In 2014, allegations that the executive vice president of health affairs has been misappropriating federal grant money (Higdon, 2015).
- In 2014, former executive director of the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine was indicted for embezzlement and tax related offenses by the IRS (Higdon, 2015).
- Between 2003-2008, former dean of UofSE ofL's school of education admitted to swindling millions in federal grant funds that were appropriated for No Child Left Behind research (Higdon, 2015).

According to Higdon (2015), a writer for *The Washington Post*, The Courier-Journal provided an assessment that between 2008 and 2014, employees at UofSE has been blamed for corruption practices involving money totaling close to \$8 million (2015). In regards to the aforementioned allegations, this case study will examine existing literature involving conflict, internal and external factors that cause organizational conflict, and current conflict management strategies. It will provide recommendations to assist in resolving lingering issues that continue to plague UofSE today.

Research Question

In this case study, the following research question is examined:

How has past employee misconduct, specifically embezzlement committed by high-ranking leaders at UofSE played a role in its current conflict management practices?

Literature Review

According to Marques et al. (2015), conflicts can be categorized as either functional (positive in nature) or dysfunctional (negative connotation) depending upon how individuals comprehend, handle, and resolve it. Liu, Inlow and Feng (2014) assert that if organizational conflict is not managed properly, it can result in a significant cost on the organization. This section of the case study will provide a literature review on factors that contribute to conflict within the organization that may add further insight to challenges that UofSE is currently facing. The review of literature in this case study will center on the impact of employee misconduct in regards to employee engagement, leadership, and organizational culture.

Impact on Employee Engagement

Lieberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) found that when conflict is unaddressed that the negative effects can lead to squandered time, ineffective decision-making, employees resigning on their own volition, undesirable changes in how the organization operates, pre-meditated harm on the organization by personnel, diminishing drive and productivity, unscheduled absences, lack of commitment, poor work environment, negative health effects, and litigation expenses. All of the above in some facet have a crucial impact on the attitude and behavior of employees in which many researchers consider the basis of employment engagement (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013; Little & Little, 2006).

Generally, employment engagement refers to the constructive, emotional work-related perception that inclines employees to act according to how they perceive their individual role within the organization. In turn, this determines their level of performance (Cattlette & Hadden, 2001; Leiter & Maslach, 2004). However, Leiter and Maslach (2004) asserted that employee engagement is different from recognized theories “in organizational psychology such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, or job involvement” (p. 94). Organizational commitment underlines the allegiance of employees to their employer, whereas job satisfaction centers on work that is adequate rather than displeasing, but does not encompass the employee’s relationship with the job (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). Job involvement is regarded as a distinct concept that resembles in association with engagement within the job, but does not comprise of the vigor and efficacy magnitudes (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). Thus, Leiter and Maslach (2004) suggested that engagement provides a more elaborate and comprehensive perspective on an employee’s connection with their position and employer.

Leadership

Leadership, in general, has been a prevailing topic of research for decades (Gini & Green, 2012; Dhiman, 2007; Lester, 2007; Shrader, 2007). As the examination of leaders developed, the concept of leadership has transformed to more of a behavioral framework describing and theorizing effective and ineffective leadership approaches. However, the term leadership has been often used to indicate good leadership without regard to bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004). Gini and Green (2012) suggested that the grasping an examination of “bad leaders/misleaders” (p. 143) is a crucial aspect of leadership research and that examples of bad leadership are just as important as the examples of good leadership (Kellerman, 2004). History has shown time and time again that individuals can attain and retain authority and influence while acting “unethical and narcissistically self-serving” (Kellerman, 2004, p. 145). Kellerman avowed that by not attempting to grasp and dissect bad leadership is to impede our ability to counter it and “if we pretend to know one without knowing the other” (p. 11) the end-result is distortion of the intended exploit.

Kellerman suggests that bad leadership is two-sided in being both ineffective and unethical and can

be subdivided into seven groups categorized as: incompetent leadership (unable to make constructive change), rigid leadership (unmovable in accepting the 'new' in regards to change), intemperate leadership (inability to regulate self), callous leadership (inconsiderate of other members of the same group), corrupt leadership (exceedingly self-serving), insular leadership (inconsiderate of those external to their group) and evil leadership (acts in a manner that is destructive mentally, physically or both). Although some have argued against Kellerman's assertion that bad leadership should be associated with leadership in general (Gini & Green, 2012), the failure to acknowledge bad leadership is indeed a mistake.

In opposition to accepting Kellerman's classification of bad leadership, Gini and Green (2012) preferred to use "misleader" in its stead. According to Gini and Green, bad leaders undercut "the conditions for communal flourishing [and] they ultimately defeat the purpose of leadership" (p. 147). Gini and Green assert that both leaders and misleaders attain power by "active cooperation" (p. 149) or "benign neglect" (p. 149) by those who follow them. Kellerman contends that occasionally exhaustion, frustration, strong-arming, or intimidation compels followers to succumb to "misguided or malevolent leaders" (Gini & Green, 2012, p. 149). Lipman-Blumen (2005) asserted that toxic leaders are individuals whose behavior turns infectious then starts to negatively impact others within and outside the organization (peers, subordinates (including their families), the organization, community and society as a whole). However, followers who purposely provide bad leaders with immense support in showing their commitment "to bad leaders, are themselves bad" (Kellerman, 2004, p. 25).

In describing the nature of misleaders, Gini and Green (2012) depicts white-color misleaders as "villains whose personal greed and desire for status, stuff, and success led them to be both utterly careless and indifferent to the financial wants, needs, and rights of others" (p. 151) that often results in a significant impact on the organization in relation to cost. Thomas (1992) contends that conflict starts "when one party perceives that the other party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about" (p. 653). Therefore, conflict is unwelcomed and can result in adverse effects within the workforce (Thomas, 1992). For this reason, inclusion of a servant leadership approach to better resolve conflict, could best serve the needs of the organization. Servant leadership's emphasis is on assisting those who play the role of the follower (Yukl, 2010; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). Sokoll (2014) conducted a study using a multiple regression analysis and discovered that servant leadership had a substantial ($p < .001$) influence on employees commitment to their managers shown by "an increased R-Square value of 0.224 (22.4%)" (p. 88). Consequently, transactional leadership and transformational leadership are also worth mentioning. Transformational theory describes leaders who have the aptitude to draw a following where confidence and support is wholly established (Burns, 1978). Dongen (2014) asserted that transactional leadership alters an employee conduct through various programs and practices while transformational leadership consist of changing individuals' perceptions on what is sought after within the organization. Vivar (2006) noted that when conflict is at its peak, it can lead to "sabotage and violence" (p. 202).

Crawford (2008) suggested that good leaders strive to examine their targets when it comes to improving communication and quality of work from those they lead. Dongen (2014) advised that this is accomplished by the firm improving the individuals "transactional and transformational leadership capabilities" (p. 6). According to Leiter and Maslach (2004), the "greater the consistency [between the person and the job], the greater the likelihood of engagement with work" (p. 101). This suggests that examining the relationship that employees have with their job is crucial to the organization's capacity to sustain an engaged workforce. This notion was further confirmed by Memon, Salleh, Baharom, and Harun's (2014) research, revealing that employees who recognize a good fit with their position and organization are inclined to be more engaged, resulting in a longer tenure with the firm.

Values

Leiter and Maslach (2004) suggest that individuals' relationships with their jobs are based on their individual values. Lee and Wilkins' (2011) research surmised that because of the dissimilarities among the employment sectors "such as internal structural differences, incentives, environment factors, reporting and communication processes" (Jaskyte, 2014, p. 283), various types of workers are drawn to the workforce. Within this context workers may base their preference of work on the job's ability to meet "their needs, fits their personal values, and provides benefits that are important to them" (Jaskyte, 2014, p. 283). Memon, Salleh, Baharom, and Harun's (2014) research revealed that individuals who find a good match with their job and organization tend to be more engaged and often remain with the organization. Some employees expect to be challenged constantly due to the some employees believing that work stressors can contribute to their growth and become beneficial in the future (Lin, Wu, Chen, & Chen, 2014; Peacock & Wong, 1990). Lin et al. (2014) wrote an interesting article on challenging stressors and stress appraisals that are often sought by employees. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) pointed out that employee differences in their perceived needs relating to being challenged can transform how individuals view, judge and implement coping strategies when facing challenges.

Jaskyte (2014) proposed an engaging question asking "whether individuals who choose to work in different sectors share unique sets of individual and work values" (p. 283). Roe and Ester (1999) found that the values of the individual and work effects employees' action and performance through employees' personal aspirations. For this reason, examining differences in individual and work values is vital when developing effective human resources practices that lead to job satisfaction and enhanced performance (Karl & Sutton, 1998; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

Leiter and Maslach (2004) implied that if the job contributes to their "personal goal" (p. 99), it is a strong incentive for individuals to remain with their employer. However, if values are in conflict with the job, it can have an adverse effect on employee engagement (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). Employees' relationship with their employer is associated with their individual values that consist of the "ideas and motivations" (Leiter & Maslach, 2004, p. 99) that originally attracted them to the job. Leiter and Maslach (2004) used an example explaining how employees can be challenged with an ordeal where a decision must be made to maintain their current position while simultaneously performing what their employer requires of them. The unfortunate predicament could lead employees to make unethical decisions that go against their personal values resulting in a division between the employee and the organization that ultimately leads to a conflict (Leiter & Maslach, 2004; Vivar, 2006; Cowling, Stanworth, Bennett, Curran & Lyons, 1988). Stevens and O'Neill (1983) recommended that in order to resolve tension caused by conflicting values is to align the employee's personal expectation parallel to the organizations. However, if the organization fails to consider the values of their employees in relation to the firm's values, it could lead to employees concluding that the solution to conflicting values is to leave the organization for a more fitting employment opportunity (Pick & Leiter, 1991).

Corporate Culture

Carmeli's (2005) study on employee perception and behavior concluded that the culture of the organization has a significant impact on their behavior in the organization and reveals that it has some influence on employees' intent to leave the firm. Chang, Rosen, and Levy (2009) also found evidence that employee perceptions of politics within the organization had a positive correlation with employees' intent to leave the organization. The aforementioned suggest that the environment of the workplace and how

employees view their firm play a crucial role on employees' intent to remain. According to Khan, Langove, Shah and Javid (2015), "Conflict signifies involvement, commitment and caring" (p. 44) and that a firm that perceive to have conflict is perhaps "apathetic" (p. 44). However, Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) assert that most conflict within organizations derive from the firm's culture and structure. Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1988) suggest by detecting the root causes of conflict can assist the firm in distinguishing and defusing significant issues and pitfalls in management.

According to Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009), "The more conservative, bureaucratic and hierarchical the organization" (p. 65) adds to the difficulty in deciding "to externalize a conflict" (p. 65) within the firm. However, on the opposite of the spectrum, Liberman, Levy and Segal (2009) assert that "the more democratic and team-oriented the organization" (p. 65), the less difficult it is to convey a conflict. An employee's willingness to participate in conflict by shedding light on a problem could be determined by how they perceive the organization and the individual's current position within the firm (Costantino & Merchant, 1996). Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) suggest that a conflict can persist inhibited due to the following:

"(1) the employee involved is senior and believes that he or she has much to lose by making the conflict public; (2) the employee, whether high or low in the organization's hierarchy, so strongly identifies with the organization that he or she is reluctant to appear to be criticizing it; and (3) the employee is young (i.e., under 30) and does not want to jeopardize his or her career at the organization by being perceived as a troublemaker" (p. 65).

Prause and Bahaudin (2015) suggest that because of globalization, "today's workplace is a melting pot of diverse cultures" (p. 13) that has caused new challenges for managers that led to a greater need for "conflict management techniques" (p. 13). Chew (2001) assert that culture cultivate mentalities in how conflict is understood, processed, and resolved. However, when people experience conflict, a great number of people often "ignore or suppress emotions" (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2008, p. 4).

Recommendations based off Prior Literature

According to the Harvard Mental Health Letter (2008), much can be learned from hostage negotiators and international peace brokers which suggest that these professionals have found that conflicts can be better resolved "when reason and emotion" (p. 4) are considered. This notion is supported by Fisher and Shapiro's (2006) research that suggests that when examining conflict resolution strategies, placing emphasis on the core concerns is essential. Fisher and Shapiro (2006) identified five core concerns that can be useful in changing emotions for the better, in efforts to head in a more productive course throughout negotiation. These five core concerns consist of appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, role and status (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006) and can be effective in addressing conflict and implementing conflict resolutions within UofSE.

According to the Harvard Mental Health Letter (2008), "Appreciation encompass the desire to be understood and valued" (p. 4), which involves one party finding value in the opposing parties' perspective. Affiliation has to do with establishing an emotional bond with the other party in an attempt to communicate as allies when discussing differences and resolving conflict (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). Autonomy is essential to resolving a problem since it involves individuals not feeling as though they were a part of the decision that has a direct impact on them (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). The Harvard Mental Health Letter (2008) provided an example of the autonomy core concern using a nurse and patient whereby the nurse objective is to rid the patient's symptoms by prescribing medicine although the patient has reservations about the side effects of the medicine the nurse prescribed. If the nurse disregards the patient's reservations as being minute, it could lead to the patient displaying adverse behavior in order to "re-establish autonomy" (p. 4)

In regards to status, to avoid a heated conflict due to status of position in the organization, one party can approach the other asking for advice that allows their perspective to be expressed and expertise can be exchanged (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2008). According to Fisher and Shapiro (2006), role plays a significant role in resolving conflict. Harvard Mental Health Letter (2008), suggest that it is vital to determine which role is best to use at the appropriate time in order to resolve conflict. The Harvard Mental Health Letter (2008), provided a list of examples of various helpful temporary roles both parties can fill in order to resolve problems: “joint problem solver, brainstormer, devil’s advocate, or mediator” (p. 5).

Corporate Climate Perceptions

Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) conducted a study on an Israeli organization’s conflict management system (CMS) for employment disputes, consisting of 314 employees, spanning five departments and nine divisions, catering to a community of 75,000 residents. According to Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009), it is commonly known that it is important that a firm’s CMS aligns with the culture of the organization in order to be effective. Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) assert that the effectiveness of the firm’s CMS is measured by the acceptance and use by its employees.

In a study examining accountants’ perceptions on their firm’s organization ethical climate, Shafer (2013) found a significant correlation with “belief in the importance of corporate ethics and social responsibility” (p. 43). According to Shafer (2013), the results of his findings revealed “that perceptions of ethical climate” (p. 43) within the organization often “reflect[ed] the “tone at the top” in the organization” (p. 43) leading accountants to justify decisions of management by amending their view on “the importance of corporate ethics and social responsibility” (p. 43). These results, according to Shafer (2013) suggest that if organizations put forth effort to stress the importance of corporate ethics and social responsibility by first improving the ethical climate could very well lessen the frequency of earnings manipulation.

Interestingly, Schwepker (2001) asserted that organizations’ climates today ranges between very ethical to very unethical. Zehir, Muceldili, Altindag, Sehitoglu, and Zehir (2014) conducted a study examining the impact of charismatic leadership on ethical climate and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and found that when a leader inspires employees to behave ethically that employees are more prone to abide by ethical policies. Zehir et al. (2014) found a significant correlation between ethical climate and OCB that was also found to be consistent with the research of Leung (2008) who also found a positive correlation with “OCB and a principled ethical climate characterized by rule and law-and-code” (Zehir et al., 2014, p. 1372). In Zehir et al.’s (2014) study, charismatic leadership had a significant correlation to OCB. However, Zehir et al. “found that ethical climate had a weak mediating effect in the relationship between charismatic leadership and OCB” (p. 1373). According to Zehir et al. (2014),

“When a leader shows sensitivity to the needs and feelings of organizational members and sets inspirational strategic and organizational goals, employees are likely to display citizenship behaviors. In addition, when charismatic leaders play a facilitating role for employees to establish positive and helpful relationships, employees will willingly help one another” (p. 1372).

Lipsky and Avgar (2010) suggest that organizations that are able to grasp the pros and cons of conflict rather than shun conflict are better positioned to benefit increased productivity and cohesiveness, increased employee morale and satisfaction.

Leiter and Maslach (2004) assert that “a worksetting that is designed to support the positive development of the three core qualities of energy, involvement, and effectiveness should be successful in promoting the well-being and productivity of its employees” (p. 94). Leiter and Maslach (2004) suggested that as the organization’s focus its attention on “what would promote engagement in the workplace, [the result] is a better framework for developing effective interventions than a focus simply on what would reduce stress” (p. 94).

Literature Review Summary

Literature provides support that an organization that places emphasis on the importance of corporate ethics and social responsibility and lead by example, can bring about change within the organization that will ultimately better address conflict and lessen the impacts of the occurrence. Leadership at its best should lay the foundation on what is acceptable and what is not that aligns to the mission statement of the institution. As employees perceives the outlook of its leaders in regards to the importance of ethics, tends to follow suit and produce a more engaged workforce.

Data Methods

Sturman (1997) assert that “case study is a general term for the exploration of an individual, group, or phenomenon” (p. 61). Simons (2009) further added that “Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’.” Gerring (2004) assert that case study research comprises of rigorous research of a distinct element for the purpose of comprehending a larger collection of similar elements, observed over a defined timeframe. Research shows that case studies allows for the researcher to obtain an in-depth holistic observation of a specific problem, and could assist in describing, comprehending, and explaining the particular problem or situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tellis, 1997b).

Discussion

This case study supports research related to the systematic implementation of conflict management systems aimed at providing a means for resolving workplace grievances at the lowest level possible. Using UofSE as the case studied, reveals that implementing a conflict management system is not an overnight feat but is the beginning of a long pursuit to implement changes in the organization that may not be quickly or widely accepted. During this case study, the researcher found that UofSE:

“Established an ombudsman position following the embezzlement, trial, and imprisonment of a high-ranking employee. Because the felon was a dean, who displayed bully characteristics and behaviors and who was believed by the university provost and president over the complaints of faculty, who expressed distress but were not heard, the faculty senate created the ombudsman role to address such situations. The impact of that case still is felt and because the university has not implemented a workplace bullying policy it continues in other places” (personal communication, February, 25, 2016).

An important finding in this case study was related to UofSE perceived need to establish an ombudsman position after multiple accounts of embezzlement involving some of its leaders and how after these allegations came to light, it was found that some of these key leaders had grievances filed against them but never produced any changes in how they conducted themselves. Although UofSE’s office of the Ombuds has seen a significant reduction in the number of grievances since being created, there are still major concerns needing to be addressed that also contribute to organizational conflict.

The ombudsman at UofSE, says that he uses a restorative approach to interacting with people and has developed a compassionate mediation style which they teach to undergraduate and graduate students (personal communication, February, 25, 2016). This suggest that although the ombudsman sees the benefit of incorporating servant leadership characteristics in assisting employees at UofSE, that if leaders themselves do not incorporate this mentality throughout the organization that conflict will still run amuck in other areas of the institution. According to UofSE’s ombudsman, his office is involved with the Peace,

Justice, and Conflict Transformation certificate program which begun approximately three years ago and is growing rapidly. According to the ombudsman, “There is much more the ombudsman's office can do within the university, but without the endorsement of upper leadership and support of deans and chairs, any attempt to change the culture to one of more compassion and collaboration is doomed” (personal communication, February, 25, 2016).

The concept of employee engagement is crucial when assessing a firm’s conflict management strategies and the handling of employee misconduct involving high-ranking leaders that ultimately affect those who they lead. Although certain changes within UofSE has been implemented to assist in mitigating and resolving employee conflict, changes within leadership has not occurred to alter the culture of the organization that ultimately effects employees’ perceptions of their organization whereby research shows that it is often evident when assessing an organization’s corporate climate.

Conclusion

The researcher asserts that more conflict management initiatives are needed in order to address the lingering issues involving the culture of the organization and its leadership. If leadership does not take into the account the recommendation of the ombudsman to address bullying that the sting from previous employee misconduct will continue to plagued not only the staff but the organization overall. It would be in the best interest of UofSE to avoid waiting on another high-profile allegation involving its leaders to in order to address the ongoing conflict within its institution. In relation to UofSE’s mission statement to develop engaged citizens, leaders and scholars, there is still a need to revamp its organizational structure starting at the top to reflect what it aims to impart in teaching diverse undergraduate, graduate, and professional students that will improve the quality of life for local and global communities (University of Louisville, 2015).

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