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STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE WORKPLACE

Simon Ayo ADEKUNLE (PhD.)

Department of Business Administration Faculty of Management Sciences University of Benin, Benin City

&

Franklin Evbomien AHONKHAI (PhD.)

(B.Sc, MBA, PGD [Computer Science], FCA)
Director, Central Bank of Nigeria, Abuja

ABSTRACT

The inevitable nature of conflict in the workplace and society at large makes the need for social dialogue vary fundamental in building harmonious workplace. Social dialogue which is all types of negotiation, consultation and exchange of information between and among representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic or social policy is critical in building a workplace governed by the principles of accountability and transparency. This paper therefore, explored the nitty-gritty of social dialogue in terms of meaning, forms, levels and usefulness. The paper also identified and practically discussed workable strategies for promoting social dialogue that can lead to workplace harmony. These strategies include: effective communication network, stakeholder relationship, capacity building, joint consultation, and culture of learning organisation. The paper concluded that the dynamic and complex business environment calls for harmonious relationship between labour and management which can be achieved by continuous dialogue.

Keywords: Communication, conflict, dialogue, stakeholders, workplace

INTRODUCTION

Dispute or conflict is inseparable part of individual's life. Some people may consider conflict as a negative situation which must be avoided at any cost while others may see it as a phenomenon which necessitates proper management (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). To some individuals, conflict provides exciting opportunity for personal growth and workplace harmony if properly managed. Conflicts grow out of diverse values, perceptions and interests that exist within a community or organisations. It is a social phenomenon that has daily reality for everyone because individual needs and values constantly and invariably come into opposition with those of other people, be it at home or in the workplace (Akinmayowa, 2012).

Conflicts in the workplace appear unavoidable since the dominant aim of management is to maximize profit, while the concern of labour is to secure and maintain the highest level of wages with the best conditions of service for their workers (Akinmayowa, 2012). Apart from differences in the interests and goals of management and workers, the

change and rapid process of adaptation which the enterprise at times has to undergo in order to survive, affect the members of the work community in so many different ways that they also become continuous sources of conflict (Adekunle, 2019).

Some scholars have identified disagreement or conflict as an inevitable aspect of every workplace and society since people in the organisation have diverse opinions, belief, interests and perception about set goals and how to achieve them (Akinmayowa, 2012; Mbah & Ifeanyi, 2012; Fajana & Shadare, 2012; Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). At organisational level, employees may disagree with management as a result of perceived injustice in resource allocation, goal differences, authority relationship, roles and expectations, jurisdictional ambiguities, among others (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). Failure to peacefully and harmoniously resolve disagreements in the workplace especially between employees (union) and management have a number of detrimental implications. Unresolved labour difference can result to strike action by union in which workers leave their jobs until the issue is settled. Also, the union can decide to organise picketing in which workers congregate outside the workplace to publicize their position. Boycotting is another option that can be explored by union by ensuring that workers and other consumers are urged to refrain from buying an employer's products. Whenever any of these measures are taken, both the party against which the actions are directed and the entire economy would be negatively affected. Such actions would result to economic and financial losses, loss of goodwill by the organisation as a result of inability to meet customers' demand as well as additional expenditure incurred in safeguarding organisational assets and dealing with other effects of the industrial crisis.

Against this backdrop, there is need for a harmonious workplace where workers' (union) aspirations are significantly met and employer's expectations are satisfied. This will also help in building a peaceful and prosperous nation where the yearnings of the people are achieved. This can be guaranteed when both parties dedicatedly pursue and achieve organisational goals in a harmonious manner by ensuring that workers are motivated and their sense of value are boosted. This will increase their productivity, thereby resulting to improvement in the organizational output (Osabuohien & Ogunrinola, 2007).

This paper is therefore structured into four major parts. The first section (introduction) provides a background discussion on the subject matter. Section two, discusses the concept of social dialogue in terms of definition, forms, level, usefulness and condition necessary for its application. Section three, outlines and discusses the strategies for promoting social dialogue in workplace. Lastly, Section four contains the concluding remarks.

CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Dialogue is defined as a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that make up everyday experience (Isaacs, 1993). Schein (1993) considered dialogue as a basic process for building a common understanding in that it allowed one to see the hidden meanings of words, first by revealing those hidden meanings in our own communication. The concept of social dialogue had been defined differently by various institutions and scholars. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2013: 39) definition, "social dialogue includes all types of negotiation, consultation and exchange of information between and among representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic or social policy". Social dialogue is a process of exchanging information and viewpoints that may ultimately facilitate harmonious

labour relations (Fajana & Shadare, 2012). Visser (2001) defines social dialogue as the first platform for common understanding or framework of reference by separating the digestion of facts, problems and possible solutions which may lead to collective bargaining where social partners engage in negotiation over their positions. Edigheji and Gostner (2000) opine that social dialogue has been traditionally defined by the tripartite institutions between government, trade unions and business that regularly act on a consultative manner on labour, social or economic policy and primarily aimed at ensuring industrial peace. Social dialogue is an engagement between social partners aimed at influencing governance (Edigheji & Gostner, 2000). Hethy (2000) describes social dialogue as a system of institutions for the reconciliation of interests on labour and economic issues by representatives of government, business and labour. Choi (2000) argues that social dialogue entails direct negotiations among the social partners.

Based on the above definitions, it can be asserted that social dialogue is a process that involves the engagement of government, employer and workers with the purpose of formulating socio-economic policies of common interest to stakeholders. Social dialogue is a process that can be strategically used to pursue economic development in any given polity and this involves consensus building on issues of national outlook and importance. Therefore, social dialogue helps to promote industrial peace by entrenching and strengthening democratic governance.

Forms of Social Dialogue

Basically, there are two forms of social dialogue. They are tripartite and bipartite. Tripartite social dialogue refers to the principles of participation of workers and employers' representatives alongside the representatives of governments on "equal footing" in decision making. In its tripartite form, dialogue involves co-operation among government, employers' organisations and workers' organisations in formulating or implementing labour, social or economic policy (ILO, 2002 cited in Fajana & Shadare, 2012). The bipartite relationship involves employers and trade unions where the government acts as a silent partner by setting the parameters for the parties' interaction (Fajana & Shadare, 2012). Bipartite social dialogue maybe seen, as a part of tripartism in which the government plays the role of provider of the legal framework, or the labour laws within which industrial relation operates. Here, the government can also serve as a conciliator or arbiter in the event that insoluble disputes may arise between parties. Bikoloni (2015) asserts that social dialogue can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or it may consist of bipartite relations only between labour and management (or trade unions and employers' organizations), with or without indirect government involvement. Fajana and Shadare (2012) assert that both forms may be purely advisory to the government or may involve negotiations leading to agreements.

Key ILO instruments for promoting social dialogue include: C11 Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921; C84 Right of Association (Non-Metropolitan Territories) Convention, 1947; C87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948; C98 Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949; C135 Workers' Organisation Convention, 1971; C141 Rural Workers' Organisation Convention, 1975; C144 and R152 Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention and Recommendation, 1976; C151 Labour Relations (Public Service) Convention, 1978; C154 Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981; Recommendation 133 (1960); Resolution

Concerning Social Dialogue and Tripartism, 2002; Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, 2008; and The Global Jobs Pact, 2009 (ILO, 2011).

Levels of Social Dialogue

Reinecke, Donaghey and Hoggarth (2017) outlined four levels of social dialogue. These include, in a sequential order: information sharing mechanism, consultative mechanism, negotiation mechanism and joint-decision making. These levels are diagrammatically represented and discussed as follows:

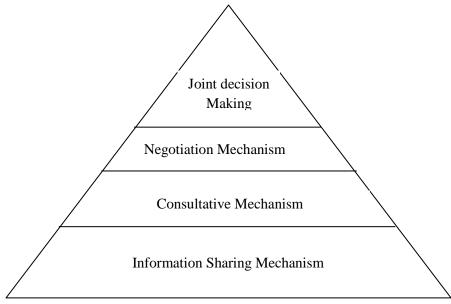


Figure 1: The Pyramid of dialogue adapted from Reinecke et al. (2017)

Information sharing mechanism: Information sharing as defined by Karakütük (2011) is the process of sharing emotions, thoughts and information between two or several parties. The interaction between parties enables the sharing and circulation of expertise, skills, knowledge and overall competencies between the parties (Miles, 2003). Parties share information and provide updates on changes that are valuable in building trust and developing a collective understanding of critical issues within the group, as well as promoting transparency (Reinecke et al., 2017).

Consultative mechanism: There is need for consultation among parties involved to come up with workable solutions to problems. Consultation will create awareness among parties involved to give room for effective dialogue and consensus on proposals (Reinecke *et al.*, 2017).

Negotiation mechanism: Negotiation is an act of strategic conduct through which two or more individuals/parties, who are in a situation of interdependence, attempt to reach agreement or common ground in relation to an issue, position or subject over which they differ or feel that they differ (Iyayi, 2006). Negotiation mechanism involves building on previous arrangement to enhance the contribution from the other party with the aim of finding lasting solutions to the problem.

Joint decision making: This stage integrates all the other stages (information sharing mechanism, consultative mechanism, and negotiation mechanism) to give room for formal decision-making platform. The aim at this stage according to Reinecke *et al.* (2017) is to create lasting and binding change or solution to an identified problem.

Usefulness of Social Dialogue

The adoption of social dialogue offers a number of benefits. Social dialogue serves as a tool for promoting stable democratic values, dealing with labour related conflicts, empowering those who lack power over others as well as themselves, creating harmony, fostering communication, helping groups to face crises and generating solutions to problems and qualitatively improve the lives of people (Bikoloni, 2015; Thamarajakshi, 2001).

Grimshaw, Koukiadaki and Tavora (2017) identified the potential benefits of social dialogue to include: raising of productivity through effective utilisation of labour, promotes inclusive transitions from unprotected to protected forms of employment, strengthening worker participation and effective voice, promoting workers entitlements to social protection and wages that support decent standard of living, better information flows, among others. ILO (2011) outlines the usefulness of social dialogue to include consensus building and democratic involvement among the main stakeholders in the world of work; creation of ownership among parties over economic, social and environmental issues; reducing conflicts and advancing industrial peace by ensuring better labour protection; providing parties an opportunity to contribute to the process of providing decent working conditions; increasing the possibility of the acceptance of outcomes by a wider spectrum of societal representatives; and minimizing the possibilities of conflicts, among others. Mariani (2013) categorized the usefulness of social dialogue into three parts namely: national level, business level and workers level. At national level, social dialogue helps to reduce inequalities while at business level, it helps to increase productivity and reduce disruption. At workers level, social dialogue helps workers to express their concerns, participate in decision making and enhance employee engagement.

SOCIAL DIALOGUE AS A TOOL FOR BUILDING HARMONIOUS WORKPLACE

Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:3; New King James Version). This scriptural injunction underscores the important of engaging in dialogue and building consensus in achieving set goals that will lead to national development. Due to the dynamic nature of workplace and the business environment, there is need for strategic partnership among stakeholders in dialoguing and building consensus that will guarantee good quality labour-management relationship (Adekunle, 2019; Mbah & Ifeanyi, 2012). In advancing harmonious relationship in the workplace, the following strategies have been identified to promote social dialogue in the workplace. These strategies include: effective communication network, stakeholder relationship, capacity building, joint consultation, and culture of learning organisation.

Effective communication network: Communication is a process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Lunenburg, 2010). Communication is considered to be effective when intended message is successfully delivered, received and understood by the parties involved. Unarguably, organizations need result-oriented communication; whether downward, upward or horizontal. For this to be achieved, barriers to effective communication must be addressed. For instance, overcoming language barriers requires the sender of the message to use the most specific and accurate words possible. For cultural barriers to be dealt with, the sender of the message should avoid projection of his own culture while trying to understand the background of others (Okhakhu & Adekunle, 2013). In the same manner, individual barrier could be reduced if the parties to communication are open-minded and showing interest in what is being said.

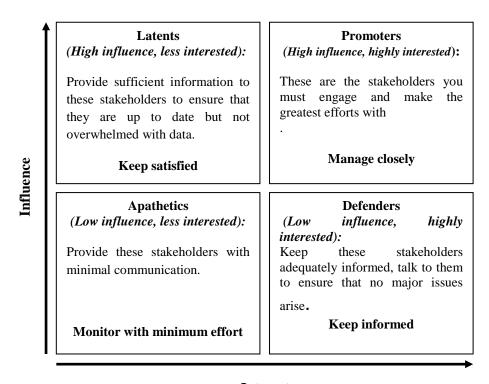
Ofuani and Ofuani (2010) observed that description, equality, openness, problem-orientation, positive intent and empathy are communication-encouraging behaviours that both boss and subordinates should embrace and practice for effective interpersonal relationship in the workplace. Fajana and Shadare (2012) found that managements sometimes feel reluctant to release information to the unions because information (especially accounting reports) may be misused. Unions on the other hand often claim they are entitled to know their employers' general and human resource management policies. Therefore, workers often express the desire to know what is happening, and the extent to which their jobs are affected. To promote harmonious relationship between labour and management, there is need for continual dissemination of labour policy by management to avoid tension and the spread of unnecessary gossip.

Different platforms are available and new ones are evolving for serving social dialogue in the workplace as means of employers' support for promoting effective interactions with workers, whether unionised or not. Some of these platforms include maintenance of industrial intranet connectivity, publication of organisation-based journals and magazines, adoption of an open-door policy in which individuals and groups can contribute their ideas in the management of the organisation, use of suggestion box, involving community and contract employees in the management of business enterprise, among others (Ofuani & Ofuani, 2010; Fajana & Shadare, 2012; Okhakhu & Adekunle, 2013).

Stakeholder Relationship: A stakeholder is a person or group of persons who have committed something to the business enterprise and therefore has expectations from it (Inegbenebor & Eheduru, 1999). They are all the groups in the environment of an organisation who can affect or are affected by the organisation's decisions and policies. There are different stakeholders involved in social dialogue and consensus building. These include government, employers or their representatives, workers/union, social partners, civil society activists, among others.

Which stakeholder interest claim priority attention of the organisation is a function of power, legitimacy and urgency. Power in this context, is a function of the dependence of the organisation on the stakeholders. The greater the dependence, the more power and influence it can exert on the organisation decision making. Legitimacy is the extent the stakeholders have legitimate claim on the organisation's resources. For instance, community has a legitimate claim for the attention of the organisation because it owns the land on which the organisation is sited. Urgency refers to the time pressure exerted by stakeholders on the organisation to act on their concern to avoid some negative consequences. For instance, trade union may threaten to embark on a full scale strike, this creates a sense of urgency to attend to the demands of the union.

A common stakeholder management tool is the stakeholder analysis grid. This involves plotting stakeholders on a graph in terms of their influence over a project and their interest in the project. This can be used to identify the kind of action to be taken in addressing stakeholders' interests and claims.



Interest

Figure 2: Stakeholders analysis grid adapted from adapted from Imperial College London Online Resources.

Capacity building: Dada (2004) described capacity as people, institutions and practices that enable countries to achieve their developmental goals. World Bank (1996) defined capacity building as the ability to identify and analyse problems, make rational choices, formulate solutions, and implement actions designed to achieve set objectives. Ani (1997) defined capacity building as the ability to formulate plans, identify and select viable options, execute, monitor and evaluate implementation of plans.

Muhtar (1997) identifies the objective of capacity building as the ability to create the framework for the identification and analysis of problems and the formulation and implementation of solutions to enhance sustainable human development. The essence of capacity building is to help in changing stakeholders' orientation to be result-oriented; acquire new knowledge and skills as well as having attitudinal change.

Capacity of workers and trade unionists can be enhanced by regular training, workshops, conferences and seminars to increase their knowledge, skills and competence. Other measures include participation in planning, delegation of authority and involvement in creative thinking, among others.

Joint consultation: Fajana and Shadare (2012) described joint consultation as a two-way communication process employed for resolving conflict arising from issues of mutual interest. According to Armstrong (2003), joint consultation enables managers and employee representatives to meet on a regular basis in order to exchange views and utilize member's knowledge and expertise in dealing with matters of common interests that are not the subject of collective bargaining. Joint consultation goes beyond informing, it entails deliberate effort by management to seek the views of workers on management's plans for

the introduction of changes. Management must believe in employees and involve them in decision making. The unions must also believe in participation as a genuine means of giving them voice and advancing the interests of their members, instead of using it as a way of getting more power (Okpu & Jaja, 2014).

According to Fajana and Shadare (2012), joint consultation performs the following functions: it gives employees the prospect of improving policies through their submissions; it offers labour and management the opportunity to identify with and have a high opinion of each other's views and perceptions; it create forum for management and labour to share opinions and ideas on all matters touching their joint and several interests in the workplace before or after decisions have been made; it provides a workable method of associating employees with the running of the business; it helps in fostering co-operation between management and employees; and improves the quality of decisions by using the knowledge and experience of those most affected by those judgements.

Promoting the culture of learning organisation: The concept of the learning organisation revolves around the practices of organisational routines that support and encourage a continuous increase in knowledge at individual, group/team and organisation levels (Marquardt & Banks, 2010). The place of individual and team learning cannot be overemphasised in promoting social dialogue and consensus building in an enterprise. Learning at the individual level occurs when organisations allow people to discuss mistakes openly in order to learn from them. It identifies skills needed for future work tasks, helps each other learn, view problems in their work as an opportunity to learn, gets money and other resources to support their learning as well as provides them time to support learning. More so, learning at the individual level increases when such organisations reward people for learning and allowing them give open and honest feedback to one another, encourage them to ask "why" regardless of rank. Learning at the individual level increases when individual employees are allowed to take calculated risks, experiment and engage in dialogue and inquiry. According to Watkins and Marsick (2003), when individuals increased their capacity to learn, they could (collectively) enhance the overall capacity of the organisation to learn as long as it was receptive to their efforts to use their learning and put in place appropriate mechanisms to enable, support and reward the use of what was learned.

Team learning offers a broader perspective than individual learning because it is linked with sharing of knowledge, insight and vision (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). It involves social base relationships in the discovery of reality. Team learning fosters collective thinking, collective actions and open dialogue which facilitate the capturing of tacit knowledge within the organisation (Watkins & Marsick, 1996). Team learning is developed when an organisation provides freedom for or allows teams/groups to adapt their goals as needed and use the recommendations, discussions and information emanating from the team to develop a culture of team reward for their achievements.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Harmonious workplace devoid of 'unmanageable' industrial crises can be created through result-oriented dialogue. Dialogue entails acceptable way of interacting in the workplace in taking decisions over issues of mutual and divergent interests. The dynamic and complex business environment calls for harmonious relationship between labour and management which can be achieved by continuous dialogue. To fully harness the potentials

inherent in social dialogue, this paper identifies effective communication network, stakeholder relationship, capacity building, joint consultation, and culture of learning organisation as strategies that can be adopted at enterprise level to build and sustain a harmonious work environment.

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