

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

Principles of Managing Conflict and Negotiations: An Exposition of Acts 6:1-8.

Fred Wantaate

Senior Pastor, Makerere Full Gospel Church, Kampala, Uganda

Abstract:

When groups of people feel neglected and under-appreciated, they will resort to desperate means of getting their needs met. Since the beginning of the Palestinian uprising (1987-1993), also known as the Intifada, parents still proudly dress up their children with suicide belts and celebrate their death as dozens of other Jewish lives, including children, are killed in suicide bombings. What kind of parent deliberately and determinedly sacrifices a child in an intractable conflict? What kind of unmet need can compel a parent to sacrifice a child for a political gain or a tactical advantage in a conflict? In this essay, we will carry out an exposition of Acts 6:1-8, to reveal strategies used by biblical leaders for managing and resolving this kind of internal group conflict. The goal of the study is to understand and describe how the early Church leaders dealt with intra-group conflict involving sub-groups that felt neglected and undervalued.

Keywords: Conflict, Negotiation

1. Introduction

When groups of people feel neglected and under-appreciated, they will resort to desperate means of getting their needs met. Since the beginning of the Palestinian uprising (1987-1993), also known as the Intifada, parents still proudly dress up their children with suicide belts and celebrate their death as dozens of other Jewish lives, including children, are killed in suicide bombings. What kind of parent deliberately and determinedly sacrifices a child in an intractable conflict? What kind of unmet need can compel a parent to sacrifice a child for a political gain or a tactical advantage in a conflict?

In this essay, we will carry out an exposition of Acts 6:1-8, to reveal strategies used by biblical leaders for managing and resolving this kind of internal group conflict. The goal of the study is to understand and describe how the early Church leaders dealt with intra-group conflict involving sub-groups that felt neglected and undervalued.

2. Exposition of Acts 6:1-8

2.1. Identifying the Root Cause of Conflict (Verses 1-2)

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, it is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (Acts 6:1-2 New King James)

From the discourse above, there are five possible causes of this conflict, namely, the multiplied number of disciples, racial tensions between Grecian and Hebrew communities, ill-prepared cross-cultural leadership, limited resources, and the inability of leaders to directly solve the problem.

Multiplied Number of Disciples (Verse One). It is stated in verse 1, "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring..." It is assumed from verse one that the burgeoning bulk of church members put a strain on the meager resources of the church. It is expected that in a large community with limited resources, disputes are likely to occur. The bigger the organization, the more vulnerable it is to conflict and the emergence of silos (Yones, 2009, para. 3). Smaller organizations may experience similar problems, but to a lesser degree. The large size of the organization may put a strain on the available resources, leading to unsatisfied needs, frustration, conflict, and stress (Ivancevich et al., 2014, 116). Maslow's theory assumes that a person attempts to satisfy the most basic needs (physiological) before directing behavior toward satisfying upper-level needs (Maslow, Stephens, Heil & Bennis, 1998). The poor Hellenistic widows complained that the church leadership was not meeting their basic needs, leading to frustration, tension, stress, and conflict in the early church.

Racial Tensions Between Grecian and Hebrew Communities (Verse One). Llectionarystudies.com. (2005, para. 2) points out that the Jewish world was divided between the Aramaic speaking Jews from Palestine (sometimes called Hebrews) and Greek-speaking Jews (sometimes called Hellenists) from outside Palestine. According to Llectionarystudies.com. (2005, para.

2) racial tension, often focused on religious purity and language, existed between the two communities, and it, unfortunately, found its way into the New Testament Church. In the wider Jewish community, racial and cultural hostility was because Pharisees often viewed the Hellenists as second-class Israelites; that perception, unfortunately, crept into the early church (Vieira, 2014, p. 110).

According to Ivancevich et al. (2014, p. 274), stages of group development include the storming stage that is characterized by competition among members for assignments, disagreements over appropriate task-related behaviors and responsibilities. An especially important part of storming can involve a redefinition of the groups' specific tasks and overall goals (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 274). Some members of the group may begin to withdraw during storming, making this stage a particularly critical one for group survival and effectiveness (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 274). As reported by Ivancevich et al. (2014, p. 274), it is essential that the conflict during the storming stage be managed, as opposed to being suppressed because suppression of conflict is likely to create adverse effects that can seriously hinder group functioning in later stages.

Ill-prepared cross-cultural leadership (Verse One). It was Jewish leader's that initially superintended the distribution of the relief supplies. This form of administration was initially the most logical and natural thing to do because the first leaders of the church were Jews from Palestine. It is, therefore, possible, the Jews originating from Palestine were better served than Jews who were born in Greek communities and who primarily spoke Greek (Hellenists). How far this was a real or an exaggerated perception, cannot be accurately determined from the text. What is clear is that the Hellenists complained of undue partiality for Jews born and resident in Palestine.

According to Cranford and Glover (2007, p. 10), the cross-cultural leaders face more ambiguity and potential for conflict than leaders leading organizations in familiar cultural settings. One of the challenges of being a cross-cultural leader is related to the cultural frame of reference of the leader, that is their values, beliefs, and experiences (Frost & Walker, 2007, p. 27). Often, a cross-cultural leader's frame of reference may need to change or at least be modified to suit the culture of the workforce or the members of the organization. Additionally, the collective organizational culture of a firm can harbor aspects, characteristics, and unconscious bias that hinder cross-cultural management (Frost & Walker, 2007, p. 28). Frequently, personal hidden or unconscious biases of the leader remain undetected until one works in close collaboration with individuals from different cultures, especially under stress, distraction, relaxation or competition (Frost & Walker, 2007, p. 28). A cross-cultural leader needs to understand, respect and appropriately respond to the different cultures of people that report to him.

Limited Resources (Verse One). The early Church gradually grew to include thousands of members within a short period:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:41)

However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand (Acts 4:4)

The exponential growth of church membership put a strain on the human and material resources of the fledgling church. When limited resources, such as money, space, labor, and materials, have to be allocated to or shared by groups, the likelihood of conflict is strong (Ivancevich et al., p. 308). Conflict is especially strong when those resources include money, and the resources are perceived not to have been allocated or shared equitably (Ivancevich et al., p. 308).

Inability of Leaders to Directly Solve the Problem (Verse One). Hitherto, the Apostles had personally superintended the distribution of the relief supplies to the poor:

Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6: 2-3)

It was not practical nor beneficial to the church, that with the increased number of believers they continue to oversee that aspect of the church directly. However, the conflict left unaddressed, may exacerbate into a more complex or violent matter leading to physical, emotional, and mental harm, not to mention the damage to the organizations' mission and goals (Oni-Ojo & Osibanjo, 2014, p. 74). Oni-Ojo & Osibanjo (2014, p. 75) postulate that any conflict that is not managed appropriately can degenerate into dysfunctional conflict, that is, a conflict that harms the organization and hinders the achievement of organizational goals (Ivancevich, et al., 2014, 305).

2.2. Meeting Needs and Dealing with the Causes of Conflict

The conflict finally provided an opportunity to deal with the problem of racial and cultural tension in the first century church. Until then it was only evidenced by murmuring and the felt tension in the church community:

Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6: 3-5).

In the section below the exposition will reveal the method used to address the cause of the conflict, the priorities set by that decision, and the nature of the solution finally chosen by the leaders and the people.

The Method. "...seek out among yourselves seven men of good reputation..." The apostles "summoned the multitude of the disciples" (6:2), and instructed them to select seven men from among themselves (6:3), but they reserved the right to appoint them officially to the task (6:3). The apostles wisely involved the whole church, but especially the Hellenistic Jews in the problem appraisal and eventual solution. The phrase "And the saying pleased the whole multitude" (6:5) may indicate a perception of fairness and justice in the final settlement by the entire church. The apostles clearly and intentionally tapped into the insights and counsel of members of the congregation who had a particular stake in the problem. They did not simply dictate a solution to the complainants without a thorough investigations of the matter. Thus the wide acceptance among the believers of the final decision enabled a smooth and successful implementation of that decision.

The method used by the leaders of the early church is an example of informational justice. Informational justice focuses on whether employees perceive that the decisions and other communication from their leaders are expounded equitably and accurately (Ivancevich et al., 2014, 129). Those in positions of leadership must be seen to be communicating to employees thoroughly, justly, fairly, and in the most reasonable manner possible to foster motivation and commitment in the workers.

Set Priorities. The Apostles seized the opportunity to delegate the oversight of relief distribution over to others who could handle it better. Sound judgment dictated that the Apostles major on the "primary" issues, and delegate the "secondary" issues to others better positioned to handle. One of the causes of mediocrity in organizations is the inability of leaders to discern between the "primary" and the "secondary". Not all problems are equal, and leaders need to consider the urgency, the impact and the growth tendency of each problem to determine the right response (Ivancevich, 2014, p. 406). Unfortunately, many leaders spend large amounts of time putting out fires instead paying attention to longer-range issues and pursuing critical new opportunities for their organizations (Ivancevich, 2014, p. 406). A new order of leaders was appointed and authorized to deal with the problem, releasing the leaders to deal with weightier matters concerning the fledging church.

The Solution. The leaders selected and appointed by the leaders and the people embodied the values of the early church community and that decision met the expectations of both Hellenists and Hebrew Christians.

Barentsen (2011, p. 2) carried out a study that approached leadership as a group phenomenon; a sense of "us" is shared and revolves around group beliefs and norms that function as the group's ideology. As reported by Barentsen (2011), groups develop social structures as they relate to other groups and as they relate to one another. Barentsen (2011, p. 2) postulates some members of the group may become more influential than others, giving rise to the group leaders and other roles in the group. The Social Identity Theory asserts that people primarily derive their social identity from group memberships, they endeavor to maintain a positive social identity (thus boosting their self-esteem), and that this positive identity stems largely from favorable comparisons that can be made between the ingroup and relevant outgroups (Brown, 2000, p. 747).

Barentsen (2011, p. 2, 41, 58-61) theorizes that leadership emergence (the way a regular member becomes a leader), maintenance (the way a leader maintains influence), and succession (the way a leader empowers new leaders to emerge), occurs in the following manner:

- Leaders emerge in a group if they embody the group's values and serve its interests more than other members (more prototypical than others).
- Leaders maintain their leadership by managing the group's social identity, and by mobilizing and empowering group members so that they become embedded in that identity.
- Successful leaders are viewed increasingly as charismatic, which earns them the social power to initiate succession by similar, prototypical leaders, and which extends their influence beyond their span of leadership.

The selection and appointment of the seven church leaders exemplify the Social Identity theory in the first-century church. Those seven leaders embodied the values and interests of the community; they were more prototypical than others. The early church Apostles maintained their leadership by successfully managing the social identity of the early church. Through their communication and lifestyle, they mobilized and empowered other group members to be embedded in the identity of the early church. Thirdly, the Apostles were viewed as charismatic and earned their social power and right to initiate leadership succession by similar prototypical leaders like Steven and Philip. Their influence extended beyond their geographical location and life span.

2.3. The Impact of Effective Conflict Resolution

The conflict provided an opportunity to deal with the problem. Until then it was only evidenced by murmuring and the felt tension in the church community. However, the result of the successful resolution of that conflict facilitated the emergence of a new crop of leaders who played a major role in the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the church throughout the world:

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:7-8)

The resultant ministry and work of Steven and Philip, not to mention Nicholas, who was a proselyte, demonstrates that when conflicts are handled appropriately, they can yield tremendous benefit to both the members and the organization as well (Lectionarystudies.com., 2005, para. 3; Oni-Ojo & Osibanjo, 2014, p. 74). At an optimal level, conflict fosters

communication, and it provides an opportunity for problems to be dealt with, rather than simply avoiding them. Through conflict resolution, an organization, can change and break away from complacency, stimulate innovation and creativity (Oni-Ojo & Osibanjo, 2014, p. 74).

Ivancevich et al. (2014, p. 305) describe two types of conflict, namely, a functional conflict and a dysfunctional conflict. A functional conflict is a disagreement or dispute that ultimately increases and benefits the organization's performance (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 305). However, a dysfunctional conflict is a confrontation or dispute between groups that adversely affects the organization and ultimately hinders the attainment of the organization's goals (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 305). Ivancevich et al. (2014, p. 305) point out that a functional conflict if it is not handled properly, may deteriorate into a dysfunctional conflict. They note that the same level of stress and dispute that enhances a healthy and positive outcome towards the organization's goals and performance may elicit disruptive and dysfunctional outcomes in another (p. 305). Research shows a group's ability to positively handle stress and conflict may depend on the type of organization embroiled in the conflict (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 305).

The early church leaders wisely handled a conflict that could have spiraled into a violent interaction or worse, a major church split. The decision of the Apostles to take action rather than ignore the problem helped restore order in the Church. The Apostles could then spend more time in prayer and ministry of the Word, and the seven men who were chosen could "serve tables" (an important responsibility that threatened the survival of the church). It is clear from verses seven and eight, that there was a rapid growth of the church that led to the respected members of society (the Priests) joining the church and becoming obedient to the faith. Justice and equitable distribution of relief were enhanced in the community leading stronger unity and commitment in the church. Additionally, the delegation of responsibility made the church stronger resulted into the emergence of a new group of capable leaders.

Ivancevich et al. (2014, p. 306) postulate that when the conflict level is too low, organizational performance suffers, innovation and change are stifled, and the organization is unable to cope with a changing environment. If a low conflict level persists, the very survival of the organization can be threatened, on the other hand, if the conflict level is too high, the resulting chaos can threaten the organization's survival (Ivancevich et al., 2014, p. 306). The successful resolution of the conflict in Acts 6 prepared the church for the next move of God; the inclusion of Gentile believers in the church community. The church was now better positioned to embrace the change that was about to take place in the church.

2.4. Application

In this essay, we carried out an exposition of Acts 6:1-8, to reveal biblical strategies of managing and resolving conflict. We used sacred texts to identify biblical strategies for negotiations and negotiation styles. We identified the root cause of conflict, in Acts 6:1-8, we identified how the conflict was resolved, and the impact of effective conflict resolution in the early church.

Conflict in organizations is inevitable. The skills of understanding and appropriately handling conflict are an integral part of the competencies of the twenty-first-century leader. As evidenced from the exposition of Acts 6:1-8, that understanding and capacity of handling conflict are not only critical to the individual leader, but they are vital to the survival and success of the organizations they lead. Organizational leaders must understand the nature of conflict they face and appropriately respond to them rather than merely avoiding them. However, leaders must understand, that dysfunctional conflict must not be tolerated because it adversely impacts relationships, productivity, and other key performance indicators (Oni-Ojo & Osibanjo, 2014, p. 75). Dysfunctional conflict must be promptly eliminated in an organization. But some level of conflict is essential in an organization because it becomes a creative force for innovation, creativity and positive change. Low levels of conflict foster mediocrity and complacency in an organization.

3. References

- i. Barentsen, J. (2011). Emerging leadership in the Pauline mission. A social identity perspective on local leadership development in Corinth and Ephesus, Pickwick, Eugene.
- ii. Brown, R. Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges. *European Journal of Social Psychology* Eur. J. Soc. Psychol. 30. 745-778 (2000)
- iii. Cranford, S., & Glover, S. (2007). Challenge match: The stakes grow higher for global leaders. *Leadership in Action*, 27(3), 9-14.
- iv. Frost, J., & Walker, M. (2007). Cross cultural leadership. *Engineering Management*, 17(3), 27-29.
- v. Huan, L. J., & Yazdanifard, R. (2012). The difference of conflict management styles and conflict resolution in workplace. *Business & Entrepreneurship Journal*, 1(1), 141-155.
- vi. Ivancevich, J. M., Konopaske, R., & Matteson, R. (2014). *Organizational Behavior and Management*, 10th Edition. McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2017-02-02. VitalBook file.
- vii. *Lectionarystudies.com*. (2005). The Acts of the apostles 6:1-7. Retrieved July 13, 2016, from <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyot/studyn/easter4aeotn.html>
- viii. Maslow, A. H., Stephens, D. C., Heil, G., & Bennis, W. (1998). *Maslow on management*. New York: John Wiley.
- ix. Oni-Ojo, B. E., & Osibanjo, O. O. (2014). *Managing Workplace Conflicts in Business Environment: The Role of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)*.

- x. Vieira, A. (2014). Holy Spirit, Church, and the Outsiders: A Brief Study of the Relation between Baptism and Holy Spirit in Acts 8: 14-17. If you would like to order a print copy of this issue of *Missio Apostolica*, go to our Facebook Page Book Store (<https://www.facebook.com>, 109).
- xi. Williams, K. Y., & O'Reilly, C. A., III. (1998). Demography and diversity in organizations: A review of 40 years of research. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 20: 77-140.
- xii. Yones, M. (2009). Dysfunctional leadership & dysfunctional organizations. *Executive Journal*. Available online at <http://www.iim-edu.org/dysfunctionalleadershipdysfunctionalorganizations/DysfunctionalLeadershipDysfunctionalOrganizations.pdf>.