

Leadership And Politics Of Stress And Crisis Management In Learning And Teaching  
In The School System

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Abstract

Effective management of stress and crisis in learning and teaching in the school system is highly important. This is of the fact that no system can succeed or achieve its goals in a strenuous and crisis ridden environment. To manage and control stress and crisis situation in learning and teaching, the role of leadership cannot be over-emphasized. This paper explains the fact that stress is an unavoidable issue in any system. It goes further to establish the various causes and effects of stress and crisis in the school system. The paper finally puts in place strategic actions for managing crisis and stress in learning and teaching in our school system.

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## **Introduction**

In any organization or institution, leadership plays a major role in crisis and stress management. Specifically, leadership promotes a coherence and peaceful environment for the smooth running of the organization. To build a compassionate environment that could aid greater productivity, crisis and stress should be managed in such a way that both the leadership and subordinates are made to benefit positively. Stress and crisis could stand as great threat against the actualization of an organizational goals and aspiration. To avoid this, the leadership has a great responsibility to put all machineries in place against this menace.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Leadership**

Leadership has been described as “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group towards goal setting and goal achievement (Stodgill, 1974)”. Also, Tannenbaum and Associates (1959) see leadership as “inter-personal influence exercised in a situation and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specialized goal or goals”. Morgan and Turner (1976:12) view leadership as “influence exercised in a situation through communication process toward the attainment of specific goals”. The definition of Bass (1990:20) is more encompassing when he noted that, leadership has to do with “the focus of group processes, as a power relation, as an instrument in the attainment of goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, and as the initiation of structure”.

Gibbs (1954) described a leader as “a person who co-ordinates the behavior of others or simply a person who occupies a position”.

All the above conceptualizations bother on the fact that, leadership depicts the process and efforts of a person or group of people to influence the behavior of others in a particular setting so as to achieve a goal or goals.

### **Politics**

Ake (1979) opines that politics is the “competition among groups to make public policy conducive to the realization of other interest and ideologies”. Dahl (1964) defines politics as “any persistence pattern of human relationship that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule or authority”. To Lasswell (1930) politics is seen as “who gets what, when and how” while Aristotle opined that politics is the essence of social existence – That is, when two or more men are interacting with one another, they are therefore involved in a political relationship. Whereas, Easton (1960), defined politics as “the authoritative allocation of value in the society”.

Politics in the school system (which is our concern here) deals with power acquisition and allocation of resources with the aim of making resolution on any conflict that may arise in the course of resources allocation.

### **Crisis**

Crisis, according to Ojo (2006:369) “is a turning point, often brought about by a convergence of events, which creates new circumstances, threatening established goals and requiring action”. It is further characterized by presumed tensions and uncertainties. The Macmillan English Dictionary defines crisis as “a dangerous situation in someone’s personal and professional life when something could fail”. Crisis is therefore a dangerous situation which can bring retardation or drawn to a particular system.

## **Stress**

Stress is a worried or strenuous situation that hinders someone from relaxing caused by pressure at work or by the reason of personal problem. Obaparusi (2008:73) stated that stress “is a person’s psychological reaction to any upsetting or adverse situation”. Having gone through the above conceptual clarifications, it is imperative to look at the management of crisis and stress by the leadership of an organization and institutions.

### **Stress as an Unavoidable Fact of Life**

It is important to understand that stress is an unavoidable fact of today’s life as it has always been. As analyzed by Udoh (2003:236-237), some stress is a part of our daily life, which we cannot completely shield away or wish away. Everyone is subjected to them. Certain kinds are actually helpful because they keep us on our toes. On the other hand, too much of stress on the mind and body can make our life miserable. Too much stress inundated with worries in a person, induces illness without knowing the cause. Therefore, how a person handles such stress determines the magnitude of the impact that such stress have on his health and happiness. If a person allows stress to build up in his mind and body it can produce tension which are serious enough to interfere with his normal daily activities. Tension generally precedes anxiety and depression, and both are injurious to health and well being.

It is hard to tell the magnitude of stress that any individual can be subjected to before he gives up. Individual vary in their stress level. Individuals have different tolerance levels and they react to the same stressors in different ways. Some individuals can take a great deal of stress in their strides and so the effect on them is not as devastating as it would be on those who have very low stress level. Also, the ability to cope with stress is subjected to at the number of stressors that an individual is subjected to the same time. Undoubtedly, no matter how strong an individual’s constitutional make up is in terms of his stress threshold, if he is subjected to a combination of several stressors for a prolonged period, the health consequences would be disastrous. Everyone has his or her optimal stress level depending on one’s physiological make-up as already indicated as well as one’s past experiences. But the important point to note is that everyone must strive to keep stress in the right amount, the right kind and the right duration so that it does not become distress. Distress generally results from either frustration, unvaried and prolonged stress (Udoh, 2003:236-237).

### **Observable/Common Causes of Crisis and Stress Situations and Its Effects in Learning and Teaching**

At this juncture, we need to look at some observable and common causes of crisis and stress situations during learning and teaching period.

- 1). Shortage of teachers and the lobby for more at the Local Government Education Areas (LGEA). This poses and results in tension on the part of the leadership. As we know, all subjects are important to the educational development of students at this level. The leader may take it upon himself to make case for this at the appropriate quarter. This may not be an easy task as he needs to put in all his efforts to solve this problem. His inability to get this problem solved becomes a source of concern to him especially when the authority is not ready to recruit more hands.
- 2). Troublesome and recalcitrant subordinates – Every system enjoys a smooth and peaceful atmosphere when the leader enjoys the support and cooperation

of the subordinates. The reverse is the case when the relationship between the leader and the subordinate is strained. Such a leader is always disorganized since whatever measures he put in place may face stiff opposition by the subordinates. Recalcitrant subordinates always tends to frustrate the efforts of the leader. This, they do by exhibiting “low trust, low supportiveness and low interest in listening to and trying to deal with problems that confront the organizational members” (Blums, 1997). The refusal of subordinates to participate may cause anxiety and stress for the leader.

- 3). Undue provocation and agitation by parents. Some parents are perpetually stress induced agents. They tend to impose their will on their leadership of the institution not minding the level of misdeed of their children (The teacher is always at fault: I don't treat my child like this. After all, I pay your salary). These and others are the belief system of some parents. Such parents create tension and stress for the leadership. The leader may continue to accept this in a bid to sustain the population of the school most especially where students' enrolment is low.
- 4). Inadequate teaching materials and infrastructures – This has become a source of concern to many leaders in our various schools. Teachers in the various villages and hamlets especially in the remote areas are usually subjected to strenuous situations. Some are made to trek many kilometers to their places of work while others have to wait for at least three days before they can get to the city due to shortage of vehicles in such routes. Base on the above, poor working condition is a major source of stress. Poor working condition according to Aqulanna (2001) relates with poor salaries and wages, irregular management of salary and allowance, lack of materials and tools to work with, insecurity induced by continual threats of retrenchments and perhaps dismissal.

This argument was supported by Adigun (2008) that poor working conditions in organization and the likes induce stress in workers. This appears to be related to so many factors such as poor salaries and wages, irregular payment of salaries and allowances, lack of materials and tools to work with, very hot offices due to non-supply of electricity, and insecurity induced by continual threat of retrenchment and perhaps dismissal.

- 5). Government policy. Recently, some head teachers in Ekiti State Nigeria are undergoing stress due to the pronouncement by the state government that their promotion would henceforth be based on their students' performances in the various examinations most importantly the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). Those whose students fall under the category of low academic performance may be under pressure at the same time undergoing sleepless nights looking for a way out. Therefore, government policy can be a major cause of stress in our school system.
- 6). Financial, marital and health challenges are the topmost stress generating factors today particularly among those who per capital income either as employees or self employed is very low. The absence or insufficient of money in a home to cater for the numerous needs creates tremendous stress and nightmare for the head of the family (Udoh, 2003). In a similar vein, any crisis witnessed in one's marital life always extends to the office. A couple that engaged in a serious battle with each other may likely witness a transfer of

- aggression on getting to their various offices. They will therefore muddle things together due to lack of concentration in office work. Instead, their minds are centered on the problem left behind at home. Coupled with the above is someone having health challenges. The illness is a source of stress to him. Inability for the man to meet the costs of mediation poses a great danger.
- 7). Performance failure on the part of the students can pose a great stress on the leadership of the institution. Whenever students exhibit poor performance, it makes the teachers and leadership of little impact.
  - 8). Pressure at work due to low welfare package, too much workload and overtime without pay could also be a source of stress.
  - 9). Broken promises by the Parents Teachers Association.

It needs be noted that the situations mentioned above are not by any means exhaustive.

Meanwhile, a school of thought has argued that stress could be of benefit in some cases. A stressed person could automatically become a charismatic leader. The sociological literature as put in place by Weber (1947), and analyzed by House (2008:347) postulated that “charismatic leadership is born out of stressful situations”. It is argued that such leaders express sentiments deeply held by followers. These sentiments are different from the established order and thus their expression is likely to be hazardous to the leader. In addition, “since their expression is hazardous, the leader is perceived as courageous”. Thus it can be hypothesized that a strong feeling of distress on the part of followers is one situational factor that interacts with the characteristics and behavior of leaders to result in charismatic effects (House, 2008:347).

*Obaparusi (2008:74) also supported this view when he submitted that “minimal and occasional stress may however be beneficial because it pools these high performance into the bloodstream and this helps the individual to perform at peak rate whether in meeting a schedule goal or in rising out in active against an offensive situation. Immediately the situation is over, the body returns normally”.*

Be that as it may, “whether or not followers distress is a necessary condition for leaders to have charismatic effects or for persons with such characteristics to emerge as leaders is an empirical question that remains to be tested (House, 2008:348).

The discussion above is theoretically and generally submitted by Obaparusi (2008:75) when he highlighted that the following could be the resultant effects of any stressors not well controlled.

- Increase in number of times the officer is away from work for domestic reason, thereby reducing punctuality at work.
- Excessive, fatigue and sleeping at work due to nocturnal (night) weakness;
- Repeat and unresolved conflict between the officer and his superior over his recent unexplainable behavior at work;
- Relationship with colleagues, subordinates and superiors is affected due to his irritability and easy provocative tendencies.

### **Strategic Actions for Managing Crisis and Stress in our School System**

It has to be stated that crisis and stress could be disastrous to any academic institution if not well managed. Armstrong (2005:837) stated that “there are four main reasons why organizations should take account of stress and do something about it”:

- 1). They have the social responsibility to provide a good quality of working life.
- 2). Excessive stress causes illness
- 3). Stress can result in inability to cope with the demand of the job, which of course, creates more stress.
- 4). Excessive stress can reduce employee effectiveness and therefore organizational performance.

In the management of crisis and stress in an institution, both the leadership and the subordinates should be greatly involved. The readiness of the subordinates is of utmost important since every efforts put in place by the leadership are meant to change the situation and reduce the stress and stop the crisis.

According to Lemay (2002:153),

*“crisis situations often require immediate decisions. The crisis nature of such decisions enhances the problem of time and uncertainty and may change the psychology of the participants as well... all involved feel greater pressure to achieve consensus as how best to deal with the crisis. By their very nature, crises upset the normal order of decision making. Routine solutions do not apply. Past experiences may be nonexistence or of limited relevance. Sometimes the nature of the crisis if serious enough will demand broad consensus and a bipartisan agreement about how to deal with it”.*

The regular push for crisis and stress management in an institution is understandable and highly germane. As Afolabi (2001:191-192) puts it, “there is widespread recognition that of all resources that manager utilizes to achieve corporate objectives, human resources is the most important. All other resources (money, machines, materials, information, etc) are inanimate and will require the human resources to activate and energise them”.

Since human resources is the most important, leadership has a great task to put all measures in place to realize and make sure that such resources is not allowed to suffer or be subjected to “unnecessary stress and crisis situation that could demoralize them”.

In learning and teaching, the following measures are therefore put in place to manage the aforementioned causes of stress.

- 1). Make good use of the available teachers. There is a common parlance the managers work more available when they are given less of what they requested for. While at the same time the head is expected to listen to the complain of his subordinate and treat them in such a way that subject area does not suffer a neglect.
- 2). Building a compassionate environment is the sole responsibility of a leader. To achieve this, a leader must put the following in place:
  - Build confidence in the followers;

- Elevate followers need for higher level;
- Elevate followers subjective probabilities of success;
- Ensure a change in organizational culture;
- Heighten motivation to attain designated outcome (extra effort);
- Build trust.

As a leader, you need the subordinate to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization. At the same time the subordinates has the greatest responsibility of respect and cooperate with the leader whose has been put in charge. Subordinates are to obey the rules.

- 3). The low population of a school notwithstanding, no parent is expected to hold a head-teacher to a ransom or put him in his/her pocket. The final authority in a school system rests on the shoulder of the leadership. Instead of being a subject of concern to the school, such a pupil should be shown the way out of the school. This will definitely reduce the tension being caused by his parents. No one should be too big or too low to be told the truth.
- 4). The leadership of the school system should improvise for the insufficient infrastructure and teaching materials and aids in their various schools. One thing is certain, there cannot be a perfect situation in any system. As a result of this, leaders are expected to always find a way out of every situation that confront them. At the same time, the leader should not relent in his effort in presenting this case to higher authority from time to time since certain instructional materials could not be improvised by the school system.
- 5). Every government policies are made to bring improvement to the school system. Ability for a leader to align himself with the policy will reduce the stress such a leader is undergoing. At the same time, such policies must be backed by resources needed to pursue them. The onus is therefore on the authority or government to provide every resources for the policy to see the light of the day.
- 6). With most things in life, peace is highly essential to every parts of our lives. Peace should start from home. Every man needs wisdom to have a marital bliss. This can only be given by God. When the peace of God is present in a home, even with the little available resources, stress is reduced. Apart from this, a leader is expected to seek counsel. This could be in form of seeking medical advice on how to overcome the strenuous situation. Good financial plan is of utmost importance. Do not allow your spending to be above your earnings. Avoid unnecessary debt that could tarnish and bring shame to one's life.

### **Conclusion**

Crisis and stress are recurrent issues in any organization or institution. Having this knowledge, control of stress should as a matter of fact form a major part of any occupational health programme. Not this alone, a good leader must always be sensitive enough to understand any change in attitude exhibit by the subordinates at every point in time. Before a situation results in full scale crisis, there is always a way out if only the leader can put all machineries in places for a conducive environment for the subordinates to thrive well knowing fully that, everyone is important no matter his/her level or status in such an organization.

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