

THE CHOIR DIRECTOR: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND HARMONY AT THE WORKPLACE

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26043.64803

Abstract.

There has been an upsurge in chorale groups within organisations in recent times in Nigeria. This has necessitated the hiring of choir Directors to steer the affairs of chorale groups in such organisations. The Choir Director plays a unique role in steering the working details of the choral group. However, these roles, if not supported by the superiors, gets him into conflicts and mis-understanding which results in frictions and setback for the group. This paper examines the working relationship between the choir director and his superiors in order to achieve desired goals. The paper highlights problems of relationships faced by music directors in discharge of their duties. It identifies several areas of conflicts and suggests ways of subduing them within the settings. Through an interpretative lens, the paper discusses conflict in the workplace with specific reference to the choir director and the organization he works for. It explores the numerous dimensions the choir director can adopt to lesson frictions in leadership in the organization. Ultimately, the paper discusses ways the establishment can create a good relationship oriented leadership for greater cohesion and effective development of the choir department.

Keywords: Conflict management. Music Director. Relationship. Establishment. Leadership.

Introduction

"Blessed is the church that enjoys a healthy relationship between the senior pastor and the music director" (Ellsworth, 2013).

Conflicts are normal occurrences in organisations. The choir group is not left out in this equation. However, when they are not well managed, conflicts can snowball into ugly situations with serious consequences. This will invariably hamper overall efficiency of the choir as an organization. Its negative consequences can gravely affect relationships resulting in inhospitable work environment and psychological stress. The ability to manage conflicts in workplace strengthens relationship and open doors of seamless opportunities for

the choir director. The choir director enjoys enormous popularity and acceptance within the society. He wields such popularity in the churches, schools or corporate organisations. However, this popularity runs him at logger head with the establishment. This result is a frigid environment that makes it difficult for it director to function effectively. It has been observed in a study conducted that over 70% of Music Directors have relationship problems with their establishment (Brown, 2013). These problems, if not nipped on the bud, affects the growth and development of the choir. This is further made worse when the loyalty of the choir members is more to the choir director than the establishment. This creates a further gap between the choir and the organisation, whose interest the choir is supposed to serve. It has often been said the when two elephants fight, the grass gets hot. There is no way such a group can make a headway if the establishment is not in sync with the working details of the choir Director. By establishment, we mean the board, superior officer, or Pastorate that the Choir director reports to. There are administrative procedures necessary for the smooth running of the organization the choral group is situated. The choir director maintains technical details for the group to ensure its day to day running and effectiveness. However, the success or failures of the group resides in the working relationship between the organization and the choir director. This will depend on the way the organization is carried along as 'he that pays the piper dictate the tune'. Conflict management depends on a range of factors, the nature of which varies from conflict to conflict. This paper examines causes of conflicts between the Music director and the workplace/organization. Failure to address the causes of frictions and conflicts leads to serious loss of time and a great burden on the choir and organization. The essence of this paper therefore, is to see how the conflict can open up new opportunities and strengthen relationships among the people involved. This study is qualitative in nature and utilizes review of literature and journal articles that bother on the subject of conflict and relationship in the workplace. Using the explorative technique, the paper investigates the problems choir directors face with their superiors. It examines how these problems can be resolved in order to maintain the right working relationship with the establishment.

Definition of conflict and conflict management

There are several definitions on the subject of conflict in an organization. While the Foundation coalition (2014) defined conflict in an organization as a struggle for political, economic or social power, and a strong disagreement between people and groups with opposing needs, ideas, values, and goals, Evans (2013) sees it as the outcome of human values differentiations. It is usually fueled by the

opposition of one community, group or party to another, in an attempt to reach a different objective from that of the other community, group or party. Conflict management, on the other hand, is the ability to be able to identify and handle conflicts wisely, honestly, positively, and efficiently (Sajid, 2015).

The music director and establishment: a relationship gone sour

The paper starts with this true story by Garth Bolinder (1986). The story gives a graphic description of what happens often in places where the shore directors and establishments cannot see eye to eye on salient issues.

"The church board meeting was going long into the night. Fatigue and frustration were raising tempers to the boiling point. Finally, one rather rotund gentleman rose to his feet in red-faced exasperation.

"How long do we have to put up with his nonsense?" he demanded as his first pounded the long oak table with a resounding thud. "We've tried and tried to be cooperative, but he just won't listen. Let's face it. He's impossible, and his music is even worse".

"Well, I think we ought to give him a chance," responded the thought-full looking gentleman in the corner. "At least, he's concerned that worship be..."

"And what do you know about worship?" snorted the first man, his bulbous nose pulsating. You are new here. You don't know how things are done."

"My wife says he's too demanding with the children. She says the kids don't even want to go to junior choir anymore, " chirped a bespectacled man in a long coat.

"If he'd just play some of the old familiar hymns once in a while. Those new tunes are so difficult to sing. When he gets going on that instrument, it seems like he's in another world."

"Well, what do we do?" asked the chairman, trying to keep a semblance of order.

"My wife thinks he should have the decency to leave on his own accord, for the sake of the children."

"Let's fire him right away, challenged the rotund one

"We can't. He's under contract," the chairman interjected.

"Then let's send him a written ultimatum that tells him in no uncertain terms he's under probation. He either gets on with our program or he's out. Don't you agree, pastor?"

Now we don't know if that board meeting actually happened like that, but we know a stern letter was sent through Dr. Deyling to the music minister. It was dated February 16, 1730. The recipient was a hardworking musician employed by a local church in Leipzig. His name? **Joan Sebastian Bach!**

The great musician J.S Bach had his own fair share of relationship blues with his establishment. It is obvious from the above discussion that the problems they

had with him was his style of leadership and choice of music. His songs were too contemporary and complex for the old puritans of his time. He stood the risk of being fired by the same folks that hired him. The board was ready to read the riot act to the 'overzealous' director. We were not told how this played out in the end. But we can safely assume it did not end well. That is why it is imperative we discuss this issue that have ruined lots of great works in an organization.

Relationship Theory.

Relationship oriented leadership theory describes a leader who is primarily motivated by and concerned with her interaction with people in the organization (Morley, 2007). According to Morley (2007) this is encapsulated in the task oriented leadership style. In this setting, the leader is motivated by accomplishing tasks given by the organization. In this task, the organization creates policies and procedures and de lol criteria for evaluating the performance of the choral director. They also often try to make the work experience enjoyable and attempt to foster a positive work environment or group dynamic (Morley, 2007).

Conflicts between the choir directors and management

There have been several conflicts between the choir leader and the pastors which often threaten the life of a local congregation. This, according to Bolinder (1986) have many churches split over worship styles, musical tastes, and service format than any other cause. Some organizations have been a continual battleground between musicians and pastors. Five areas of conflicts are considered in this section. Conflicting issues can easily be resolved before they snowball into irredeemable consequences. The relationship between the music director and the head of the institution (be it pastor or School principal) is one of the most important tool for progress in the establishment.

1. **Conflict of interests:** - The overriding conflicts of interest has a way of tearing the choir apart. The management has a blueprint for the choir. The choir director equally has his own blueprint. The task of the choir director is to see how to fuse both together to the benefit of the organisations. Where there is an overriding interest that negates the plans and purpose of the establishment, there is bound to be friction.
2. **Conflict of duties :-** Every organisations has prescribed duties outlined for the choir director. These duties are spelt out in 'black and white'. It is the duty of the choir director to be in charge of every ethnically details of the choir. That is the reason why he was appointed in the first place. However, when the management decides to look into the technical details of the

choir and attempt to dictate to the choir director what should be done, there is bound to be conflicts.

3. **Conflict of loyalty:-** The management expects nothing but 100% loyalty from the choirmaster and his members. The moment the choir director starts shifting his loyalty from the organisations to somewhere else, there is bound to be conflict.
4. **Conflict of trust:** - The choir director is not seen as a musicologist. His ability to conduct the choir with every true sense of trust and integrity. This is seen in his interpersonal relationship with members of the group. The moment there is any reason to doubt his integrity, there is bound to be conflict.
5. **Conflict of mutual respect:** - This boils down to the ability to accept people's opinion and worth even when they negate our ideals. This is the ability to find a common ground in relationship. With such an attitude, it is always a 'win win' situation.

Ways relationships can bring about effectiveness at the workplace

The choir can only make meaningful impact if there is a harmonious relationship between both parties. According to Harland (2016) a church can sense the health of the relationship between the pastor and music leader. Knowing that the relationship between the pastor and the Choir director can be notoriously tricky, I hereby highlight useful tips on how you can do this effectively without causing undue friction or conflicts.

1. **Document your Tenure-ship** - Ensure you have a letter of appointment duly signed by the management or institution. This should be followed up by a contract details of your entry and possible disengagement from the institution. No matter how small and seemingly insignificant the church is, insist on a paper documentation for the records. Even if you are doing the job for free, let there be a written agreement. It saves you from a lot of future troubles.
2. **Know your duties and responsibilities** - Your responsibilities should be clearly spelt out in your documentation. Your duty there is not utilitarian. It is bound by the four walls of your 'job descriptions'. Know what your parameters are and work within the parameters given you. There should be clarity on the scope of your responsibility as a Choral Director. This is vital in a smooth relationship between the board and the Music director. If for example it stipulates your overall control of the music business in the establishment, seek to know the boundaries so as not to run foul of their rules.

3. **Develop mutual trust and respect** - There must be mutual trust and respect between the Music Director and the institution. According to Guenther (2016) this would start in an obvious way – getting to know each other, learning what the other person values in terms of worship and music and discovering how each of them sees their relationship. This takes a commitment of time for regular meetings and personal investment in the relationship, but will pay huge dividends. Initiating these discussions early on will pave the way for a healthy, mutually supportive relationship.
4. **Don't pull up surprises** - Sometimes we do things with the intent of impressing the establishment. But surprisingly, they may not be too pleased with 'pleasant surprises'. If you must introduce some major changes to their style of worship, it is necessary to seek the permission of the head before doing so. Maintaining a healthy conversation with the head on your plans helps in building trust and relationship with the establishment.
5. **Initiate discussions** - Meet with your leader in a regular basis to discuss your plans, concerns, fears, and aspirations with him. He doesn't have to agree with you in all conversation. But in all, you need his support and encouragement.
6. **Be organized** - You must have a winsome personality. The aura around you must be that of neatness and order. your personality must be such that the leaders can trust the people into your hands.
7. **Team spirit** - You are not in competition with anyone. You should cultivate the habit of working with others outside your unit. Sometimes, the rancor and intra unit war is being fueled by the choir master's bid to invoke undue supremacy over other units. Humility and the desire to work with others should be our focus in the group.
8. **Balance** - There should be a balance in the musical styles and selection procedures. The old must not be jettisoned for the New. In the same vein, the new must not overshadow the old styles.
9. **Get people involved** - Plug people in. Have them to your house. Have worship team dinners. Build community. It's good for the church, and it's good for the pastor to see you getting people involved. The choir should be participants rather than mere performers. The choir director should strive to be a minister instead of a producer. Integrating these factors bridges the gap between the congregation and the choir.
10. **Accountability and probity** - One major problem of many choir leaders is in their ability to be trusted with money. When a certain amount is given or contributed and the choir director cannot give account of how the

money was spent, it leaves too for fighting, rancor and subsequent mistrust from members and the leadership.

11. **Periodic Evaluation** - There should be a mechanism adopted to evaluate your works periodically. Feedback is very important from the choir, church members and the leadership. Don't wait for the leadership to tell you to your face that you are not measuring up. The choir should be able to evaluate their performances objectively. They should be able to also evaluate you too. Find a way to get information about your successes and shortcomings. Accept criticism in good faith and work to make improvements where necessary. Be open to suggestions, no matter how inconsequential they may look. Be a leader with listening ears and open mind. This will help you to be on top of your game in the music business.

Managing conflict: A Word for the establishment

1. **Acknowledge and commend their creative inputs** - sometimes, the Music director is faced with a leader that insists on doing things his way without any recourse to the creative ingenuity of the choir director. That is the reason why you hired him in the first place. Seeking their input into any musical plans strengthens the relationship and invokes more trust in the relationship. There is nothing more demoralizing than working under a leader that sees nothing good in what the choir director does. Take time off to encourage your musicians. They are human too. They need encourage the and prayers. There are some establishment that frown at clapping after any ministration. If it was a superb performance, and the congregation wants to clap, please let them clap. After all, it is a way of showing appreciation for the good job done by the choir.
2. **Allow for freedom of creative expression** - The choir director is abreast with changes in musical styles. The leaders should allow him to express those talents within the context of existing structure. Doing things as you have always done it before doesn't make for growth. New innovations can be worked out to make the service more vibrant and dynamic.
3. **Pay your Directors promptly** - In some establishments, the choirmaster are the last to be paid, and sometimes in piecemeals. Choirmasters should also enjoy all the benefits accorded other members of staff. This will go a long way to encourage them to do more for the establishment.
4. **Send your schedules way ahead of time** - The choirmaster is not a magician. He doesn't know all the songs in the universe. As much as

you do not like the surprise element, plan your music schedule for each service ahead of time to allow the music team prepare effectively for the ministrations.

- 5. Engage your choir director periodically** - Have deliberate meetings with the choir director. This can be in form of a luncheon or dinner. Use that to ask about the challenges in his unit and how the church can be of help in resolving them. Through that, you are building bridges, not erecting walls!

Conclusion

It is not easy to build good relationship, especially in a place that is hostile to the choir director from the first day. However, efforts should be made to build and work at it. It may be a daunting task at the first attempt, but the result is worth the effort. Both the choir and the management team should endeavor to work as one. Mutual concern and joy are contagious. It is therefore imperative we make people around see that we not only work well together - but actually enjoy being together.

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