MELANESIAN VALUES IN A CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT
The organizations in which we go about our daily lives are indeed complex. Not only do subgroups interact within our educational organizations but also these same organizations interact with the myriad organizations that form the whole of society. Such continuous interaction at all levels in our educational organizations is part of a giant network which is changing rapidly. All complex organizations as in the case of educational systems manufacture elements of conflict and stress. As leaders we need a theoretical tool to describe this continuous evolution if we are to understand our organizations and so lead people. This paper presents an analysis of the processes employed to blend in Papua New Guinea (PNG) Melanesian cultural values and practices in a reconciliation process that took place in St Benedict’s Campus of Divine Word University (DWU).

INTRODUCTION
All complex organizations as with the case of educational systems manufacture the aspects of conflict and stress. In his book “Educational administration and organizational behavior” Hanson began the chapter on conflict and stress by making the following observations:

For many educators who spend their days in schools – facing the challenges of everything from intellectual inelasticity to kids with “industrial strength” mouths – riding the tiger is by no means satisfying or easy. Yet there are those who respond to those same situations with poise, talent, and the requisite élan. How is this possible? (Hanson, 1996, p. 259)

While sharing similar sentiments, personal experiences of the potential unpredictable human emotions in organizations contribute a lot to any form of resolving conflicts. This paper presents an analysis of the conflict resolution processes employed to blend in Papua New Guinea Melanesian cultural values and practices in a reconciliation process that took place during the 2006 Easter ceremonies in St Benedict’s Campus of Divine Word University. For a better understanding and appreciation of the process, it is important to briefly explain at the outset what constitutes the St Benedict’s Campus community.
ST BENEDICT’S CAMPUS COMMUNITY

St Benedict’s Campus is located outside of Wewak town, the main centre of East Sepik Province. On the Campus there are five institutions including the university community, an elementary school, a primary school, the National Callan Services Unit and Callan Services Wewak. Like other national institutions, each of the provinces of the country is represented in the St Benedict’s Campus populace. Predominantly in the elementary and primary schools and also with the Callan Services institutions, the dominant ethnic group is Sepik with only a handful of people from both overseas and other provinces.

With the multiplicity of institutions on campus, an effort has been made to unite the staff of the separate institutions through the provision of a common staff morning tea room at the back of the Great Hall. The availability of this facility has been valuable as it has provided an opportunity to relate with staff who potentially would never cross paths because of the diversity in educational pursuits and ministries.

STUDENT AND STAFF POPULATION OF ST BENEDICT’S CAMPUS COMMUNITY

The student intake each year is made with due consideration to academic performance, province of origin, gender balance and other such criteria. With its location in East Sepik and adjacent Sandaun Province, understandably the local ethnic groups of these two provinces have a higher proportion of representation in the student and staff population compared to other regions.

The students come from all provinces in PNG. However, 30% of the university student population is East Sepik students while all other provinces have representations that range from 0.6% to 13%. Be that as it may, there is a concerted effort to exhibit cultures from all the provinces that the students represent.

While the majority of students are between the ages of 17 to 21, the enrolment of new students has also tapped into more mature students who have experienced life but are interested to get into the teaching profession. The more mature students have been a powerful force in providing good role models to the younger students.

NEW LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

One of the major changes at the St Benedict’s Campus has been the induction of the new administrator. Prior to his induction, the Campus was run down, in debt and the morale of the staff and students was low. Within the first five months, he was able to turn the entire Campus around and provided a new lease of life for all stakeholders. He did this by being present and listening to them. He has provided a vision and established strategies to help improve the morale of the staff and students. As mentioned earlier, a common venue for morning tea for the staff of all five institutions on the same campus has been valuable. In doing so, he was able to begin the process of establishing partnerships with staff of these institutions.
The main strategy that he employs is to blend his own Melanesian leadership approach with western leadership approaches. This has been possible because his PhD thesis was on the “Leadership of Papua New Guinea Principals in New Ireland Secondary Schools”. The study explored the leadership approaches of New Ireland high school administrators within the province’s cultural context. The study concluded that in New Ireland and PNG in general, norms and values of the communal lifestyle influenced and shaped leadership practices in the modern-day bureaucratic school organization (Tivinarlik, 2000). The communal value system that was explored included the kinship relationships, wantok system, and big men-leader ideology.

Melanesian societies are organized on the basis of kinship, a distinctive characteristic of tribal societies around the world (Whiteman, 1995). Whiteman (1995) elaborates that “kinship is a system that prescribes how people living together should interact with one another”. Within each cultural group “there are usually smaller groups of more closely related people whose loyalties to one another are greater and who interact more frequently with one another than they do with other groups” (Whiteman, 1995, p. 106). The wantok system is closely related to the kinship relationships. MacDonald (1995) describes the wantok system as a metaphor derived from language and applied to human relationships. In a limited sense, wantok refers to people who speak a common language. In a broader context, wantoks are people who understand and support each other. The term wantok represents a bond of people with a basic community, a kinship community, speaking the same language, living in the one place and sharing common values (MacDonald, 1995). This communal value system has an impact on the current PNG education system and its leadership with both positive and negative influences.

The positive influences included principals integrating the kinship relationships and the wantok system in their endeavours to make the school’s bureaucratic machinery work. However the negative aspects of such a system are experienced when principals or leaders used the system to disadvantage or exclude other groups of people. Such practices tend to result in negative, dysfunctional, unproductive practices within the organizations.

The rationale for much of the moral behaviour in traditional PNG depended upon the overall welfare of the community (McLaughlin, 1994). Behavioural patterns are considered morally correct or inappropriate depending upon community interests (Mantovani, 1995). The governance of the community reflects communal values in particular, sharing for the common good.

It is in light of the Melanesian communal value system that the Campus administrator pursued the reconciliation process. The administrator did not totally dismiss the Western judicial system or the bureaucratic process of the education system. What he was able to do however, was to select appropriate strategies from both the Western and Melanesian systems to use in the process. The symbols used in the process were a combination of both Western Christianity and Melanesian traditions. At this juncture, the focus turns to the analysis of the process.

**ANALYSIS OF THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

There are four stages of the analysis process. The first stage will focus on the events leading up the reconciliation process. The second stage will examine the actual incident
with staff that transpired to warrant reconciliation. The third is the mediation process. The final stage is the actual reconciliation.

**STAGE 1: EVENTS PRIOR TO THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

It is important to note that reconciliation does not happen in isolation. The readiness to reconcile with one another is attributed to a number of factors whether immediate or remote. Among others, two of these events are worth mentioning.

First, at the end of 2005 when nominations and elections were called for students’ leadership, a theme that was echoed throughout the election process was to elect a team that would work together rather than elections for individual positions. This set the tone for team work.

Second, after an evaluation and much thought, a program of induction for both staff and student leaders was then planned for 2006. This program included a study of the enneagram personality type, the exploration of individual and communal visions for 2006 and an affirmation exercise focusing on each individual participant.

The induction sessions took place mainly on weekends over the course of the first two months of the 2006 academic year. All the staff and most of the student leadership teams have undergone the first of the induction programs. The leaders of each of the cultural groups are yet to undergo the induction program. It is interesting to note that after each of the induction sessions, changes in behavioural patterns were evident.

**CONFLICT AND STRUGGLES**

In all organizations, it goes without saying that conflicts and struggles are part and partial of organizational life taking into account the human element. Needless to say, St Benedict’s has had its share of struggles. Most of the struggles have been attributed to the introduction of educational change in the Campus, change of leadership personnel and restructure. One incident stood out which is noteworthy for mention as it set the tone for the initiation of the whole reconciliation process.

**STAGE 2: THE CASE OF JANE AND PETER**

The conflict involved two staff members, one female and the other a male. For simplicity’s sake the two people involved have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. Thus, they are identified as Jane and Peter. Both Jane and Peter hold positions of responsibility within their own right on the Campus. The incident took place after a movie show on a Friday night with the students. Jane was walking back to her home when she crossed paths with a young woman who seemed to have appeared from the bushes after being dropped off by Peter. Thinking that the young woman was a female student, Jane accosted her and accused her of being at the wrong place at the wrong time and that she should have been in the dormitory by that time of the night. The young lady told Jane that she was not a student and that she was dropped off by Peter who had
just returned from a long trip up the highway pursuing orders for timber for a new building project.

The argument between Jane and the young woman continued for some time. Later that evening, Peter got word about the confrontation. He then got up from his meal and headed straight to Jane’s residence calling her names and broke open the front door of her house while in possession of a bush knife. Jane by this time was terrified and remained quiet in her bedroom. While Jane was not physically injured, she was badly psychologically bruised.

Sometime after she gained her senses, she phoned for help and eventually the administrator and another staff member arrived to see Jane. This would have been around 1 to 2:00 in the early hours of the morning. By the time they arrived at Jane’s house, the security guards were already at the house offering their help. They heard Jane’s story and by this time she was really determined to go to the police to make a plea for an immediate arrest of Peter with the view that he be taken to court. Jane did not want the matter to be pursued by the Campus administration.

The auxiliary police were informed about the matter the next day and an arrest was made. Peter was taken into police custody and locked up in the cell for two nights awaiting court action on Monday morning. During the police arrest, the police asked Jane to take the matter to the Campus administration to resolve it at that level. Jane was adamant that Peter be locked up and legal proceedings be pursued. The case was heard on Monday and Peter pleaded guilty to the charges. The court then set out to impose a hefty fine to be paid within four days. While employed at the Campus, Peter does not earn sufficient salary to feed, clothe and educate a family of six children. Consequently, the size of the fine created an enormous burden as Peter struggled to get the money paid within the set period. To pay the fine, he set out to borrow money from friends. While the court dealt with the case, Jane was not satisfied and wanted harsher treatment to be awarded to Peter. After legal advice was sought, the Campus administrator pursued a process to reconcile the two parties, much to the dislike of the majority of both the ancillary and academic staff. The staff wanted Peter to be terminated and pictured him as a dangerous wolf unfit to live and work in the community. Jane, angry and bruised, made the point that Peter’s employment at the campus should cease immediately.

**STAGE 3: MEDIATION PROCESS**

The administrator held a different view from that of the majority of staff, but sought to have a meeting with both parties in the presence of a mediation team consisting of a campus counsellor, the appointed head of the campus for the following year (2007) and the current administrator. The intention was to let Jane and Peter face each other and present their sides of the story. Both Peter and Jane had not faced each other to hear each other out since the arrest and court case. Even at court, Jane was not present to listen to what Peter said. She only turned up for the sentencing.

The meeting was arranged three days after the court case and all agreed to meet. When it came time for the meeting, Jane refused ten times to walk into the meeting as she did not want to face Peter. At this stage Peter was so low he could not face people and he was so ashamed about what he had done. He was also troubled about the court
fine and was not really himself. The administrator convinced Jane and she reluctantly attended the meeting.

The meeting took place and went on for almost two and a half hours. The fact that the two parties met proved positive. In the end there was some understanding as to each person’s perspective. There were tears shed and the group was alerted to the fact that while other staff members saw Peter as a dangerous wolf, he felt more like a dog running away from everyone with its tail between its hind legs.

**CIRCLE OF ELDERS – THE OPEN SESSIONS**

Two open sessions with the maintenance staff and the academic staff followed. The open sessions were organized following a Native American practice of resolving conflicts using the “circle of elders”. For these open sessions, a chair was placed in the centre of a circle and anyone who had anything to speak to the case could only talk while seated in that middle chair. Those who were seated in the circle were not allowed to speak. The one who spoke also had to hold a cross which had wrapped around it a “tanget” leaf. The cross symbolized peace from a Christian perspective while the “tanget” leaf is a very important symbol within the local PNG cultures. The open sessions provided an avenue for those involved to vent how they felt about the case.

At the outset, the administrator admitted that the open sessions were not really easy for him. They really frightened him, but he chose to conduct them. He was frightened because his limitations would be exposed and for that he felt vulnerable. The decision to go ahead with the sessions was made because he had to demonstrate that each individual’s opinion about the case was valued. As it turned out, people were very critical about his leadership. Obviously, he had differing views and was also able to share these with the groups. The end result though was that people were free and many in the group after that meeting realized that reconciliation was the better option rather than the termination of Peter. It was even suggested that the termination of Peter would have potentially led to possible payback incidents which are not uncommon in these parts of the country.

**STAGE 4: RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

The administrator had several discussions with the College Chaplain who is also a spiritual figure-head for the campus about the case and the open sessions. What was evident to both of them was that the whole community needed to have some healing in their attitudes towards one another. There were also other issues with students that had surfaced during the trimester that required healing. There was disharmony among families of staff that needed attention. Another open meeting of a number of families on campus was held in the evening of Good Friday to resolve another crisis. As it turned out, the entire community was in need of healing and so the two leaders needed to initiate a process to allow reconciliation to take place.
The administrator and the chaplain then agreed to plan a reconciliation ceremony which was to coincide with the Holy Week¹ and Easter celebrations. The students and staff of all the institutions on campus were told that the theme for the Easter Sunday morning Mass was going to be “reconciliation”. Each person was asked to bring a gift along and instead of shaking hands during the kiss of peace, people would exchange gifts with someone with whom they would want to reconcile.

Regional groups of students and staff groups were also asked to bring along symbols of peace from their societies for offering in a ceremony which was to be held after Mass followed by a meal. For the meal everyone was asked to bring a plate for the meal.

What transpired in the festivities was the highlight of what Easter should be. During the Easter vigil Mass, the community gathered around the Easter fire and the ceremony began. As in all other years, the students built a very big fire. All along each cultural group that prepared the Holy Week liturgies had traditional dances for the ceremonies. So there was a good blend of the local Melanesian cultures in the liturgies. The Highlands students prepare the music for the Easter Vigil Mass. After that Mass, the community gathered around the Easter fire and danced until 2:00 am. When all dancing ended, while the community went to rest, some students stayed up to prepare food for the festivities for the next morning.

The New Guinea Islands students prepared the liturgy for the Easter Sunday morning Mass. Again, they had a good display of their own traditions at the ceremony. During the kiss of peace, the whole congregation walked around and exchanged gifts. At the end of Mass, the community gathered at the Easter Square. Three things happened during that gathering. First, the students burnt off some of the disposable gear used in the dances for the liturgies for the Holy Week celebrations. This is a Melanesian symbol for closure of a celebration. Second, each group came forward with their spokesperson and expressed a word of reconciliation to the community for the wrongs their members would have caused to the community. Finally, everyone partook of a meal.

When it came time for the reconciliation ceremony, there were more groups and individuals who came up to reconcile with the community. The Bougainville group was very moving as they knew what peace means and sought to reconcile not just with the campus community but with the whole country for the troubles on the island some years ago. Peter whom we spoke about earlier, came out and also offered his symbol of reconciliation. It is important to note that Peter was not only reconciling with Jane but he was reconciling with the entire Campus community because he had hurt the community.

In reflecting on the whole process from the beginning, this seemed to be a meaningful way of walking the path of crucifixion and celebrating the resurrection of Christ. For the individuals and groups who fully entered into the reconciliation, the experience was one of liberation. The Campus administrator expressed the process well when he said: “It is not that we fall down, but how we pick ourselves and each other up when we fall is the challenge. We do not claim to be special, but for those who want to do it, this is an appropriate way of celebrating the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies”. The staff and students agreed this was a positive experience and are already talking about having this again in the future.

¹ Holy Week and the Easter celebrations for Christians are very significant. During this particular week Christians celebrate the redemptive work of Jesus Christ in His Passion, Death and Resurrection.
IMPLICATIONS: LESSONS TO LEARN

From the experience, what are some of the learning? Firstly, for reconciliation to be successful, all parties involved need to understand and own the process. This means the process has to be meaningful and genuine. For that to happen, the process needs to use symbols, language and gestures that appropriately communicate the message of reconciliation to all parties.

Secondly, Melanesian values can be utilized in contemporary organizations. Melanesians employ a “win-win” option in conflict management. The Campus administrator was able to make this happen for his community because he is highly qualified not just in Western leadership approaches but also in his own Melanesian communal value system. He sums up this process well when he asserts that to lead in a multiplicity of cultures, it demands one to be culturally sensitive, challenging, and balanced (Tivinarlik, 2000).

Thirdly, the bureaucracy evident in educational institutions idealizes a “one win, one loser” situation which does not necessarily resolve conflicts. In this reconciliation process, the evidence suggests that there were divisions and disagreements among the staff about the process. Most of the Campus staff did not agree with the administrator and the processes that he was employing. They wanted the Western judicial system to run its course and settle the case. In other words, they wanted the male staff to face court, fined or jailed, and terminated from the Campus. Using such a system would mean they had no responsibility for the case.

Finally, Melanesian societies are community oriented and so relationships are very important in leadership (Mantovani, 1995). In resolving conflicts in contemporary PNG educational institutions, one has to be prepared to put in the time it takes to resolve grievances. The efficiency of the ideal bureaucracy does not necessarily work. Time is not wasted in listening to people as it does go a long way in settling people down who may be at odds with one another. Whenever it takes place and a process is entered fully by those involved, the experience can be very liberating. It just takes a lot of humility.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reconciliation process and ceremony has brought the community much closer together. The work of reconciliation is an ongoing one. Such a process is not easy and further demonstrated the importance of strong and reflective leadership. The process can be complicated in an educational institution using a western bureaucratic system. However, with good leadership it is possible to incorporate their Melanesian communal value system to make the Western bureaucratic system function. The Campus administrator demonstrated this is possible. This leadership approach is rare and needs to be nurtured in PNG educational institutions. Earlier research (Pagelio, 2002) concluded that the leadership approaches employed in educational institutions have reflected colonial practices which is disempowering for the subordinates. Such leadership practices are inconsistent with traditional Melanesian practices where leaders must earn their title through hard work, fighting ability, and wealth. Traditionally these leaders “Big Men” were feared for their abilities in magic and sorcery and their feats as
warriors (Rogers, 1970). In the current educational institutions, the leadership qualities that were required for traditional societies may no longer be appropriate. However, what is important is for the current educational leaders to provide clear directions for growth in times of rapid change and also be culturally sensitive to the struggles and conflict that arise among stakeholders with institutions. Being culturally sensitive in times of conflict within educational institutions is a new area that needs to be addressed by leadership.

References


