How does conflict cause change in terms of lis? assignment

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conflict as " a state of opposition … the clashing of opposed principles… the opposition of incompatible wishes or needs". Change is " the act or an instance of making or becoming different. " It is not surprising, then, that organisations experience tensions when new strategies are introduced, as it is at just such times that established principles and methods are most likely to be challenged, altered or jettisoned.

The present environment in which LIS are operating is one of rapid technological development, increasing competition and social change (Bluck, in Pinder and Melling, 1996). Like many other organisations, they have had to reassess conventional practices, are adopting new structures, strategies and values, and are developing new skills amongst their staff. For a manager, dealing with change presents a dichotomy. Buchanan and Huczynski (1991) point out the paradox that differences are essential to change but that it is these differences which can generate disputes.

As Deutsch (in Vayrynen, 1991) points out, conflict is likely if there is a perceived incompatibility or if the participants perceive that there is utility in conflict, that is, something to be gained or less to lose than by remaining passive. However, many writers, including Handy (1993), Mullins (1996) and Edelmann (1993), argue that a certain amount of conflict is both inevitable and healthy, provided it is directed positively. The danger is that conflict can become personal and negative, and undermine individual and organisational performance.

Striking a balance between the two is easier said than done and a manager will need to employ a variety of methods in attempting to do so. For the most part, the strategies for managing change and conflict in LIS are no different to those which apply to organisations in general because, essentially, they all deal with human reactions to a changing environment. Indeed the LIS literature on the subject reflects these general themes (for example, Eggleton, 1979; Allred, 1987; Baker, 1989; Buch, 1997; Pettas and Gilliland, 1992).

Therefore, the framework for this discussion will a general one, with examples from LIS where appropriate. According to Daft (1994), managers sense a need for change when they perceive a performance gap, that is, a disparity between existing and desired levels of performance. It seems a somewhat narrow definition in that it implies that all change is planned and positive and seems to ignore the possibility of unplanned and potentially negative change – for example, unexpected budget cuts.

This said, most change is planned, is intended to be positive and arises from the need to respond to new challenges and opportunities (Mullins, 1996). Organisational change may be incremental (linear) or radical (discontinuous). It may be a reactive response to external, environmental factors or generated proactively in anticipation of future trends (Hamel, 1998). Both, however, are a response to how an organisation perceives its current or future environment.

Indeed, one can detect a Darwinian ' adapt or die' thread running though many authors interpretations (Goble, 1997; Hamel, 1998; St Clair, 1996), a

concept summed up pithily by Handy (1993, p. 291) with " change is a necessary condition of survival". Environmental factors include technology, government, the economy and societal values and behaviour. For instance, in recent years, LIS have had to adapt to the rapid development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the Labour government's plans for national computer networks in public libraries and schools.

As Goble (1997) notes, they also face competition from external providers in an increasingly commercialised information services market where there is rapid price inflation for both printed and electronic sources, adding pressure to already tight budgets. Further, in a service economy, consumers have become more demanding and, lastly, the composition of the workforce is changing, with an ageing population, more women, plus more part-timers and job sharing (Mullins, 1996). In response to, or in anticipation of such factors, organisations may initiate change.

This can incorporate both structure (hierarchy and division of work) and culture (how things are done – values and norms), and such change may involve, amongst other things, costs, job design, staff development and training, working conditions and new services or products (Cornell, 1996). Change and how people react to it are important features of organisational life. Conflicts can arise at any time but because it derives from people wanting or perceiving different things, a period of change is, by its very nature, likely to provoke mixed reactions, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to overt resistance.

As discussed above, interpretations about the scale of the changes currently facing LIS vary. My own view is that whilst much change, especially in the public and academic sectors was initially driven by the political and economic realities of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the rapid development of ICT represents far more than " new techniques in retrieving information" and is generating both new services and new approaches to the delivery of LIS.

Such changes cannot occur without creating feelings of anxiety, tension, fear and loss. For management, the challenge is not so much how to ' avoid' or suppress conflict as these changes occur, but to try and understand them and provide effective support and mechanisms through which conflict can be directed into productive channels. Whetton and Cameron's research (in Allred, 1987), indicates that effective managers will employ a variety of techniques when dealing with conflict, depending on the circumstances.

There will always be some who will respond negatively to change as a matter of course but, as Edelmann (1993) states, if a genuine attempt to resolve tensions and conflict is made then a manager should not blame him/herself if it is unsuccessful. Whilst there is no perfect solution, collaboration and participation represent the most effective techniques at a manger's disposal for securing co-operation and confronting negative reactions during change.