

COMMUNICATION FACTORS AND INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT HANDLING STRATEGIES IN STATE OWNED UNIVERSITIES IN THE SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of communication tools on industrial conflict management handling styles with particular reference to state owned universities in south west Nigeria. The study adopted the descriptive research survey design of the ex post facto type. Human behaviour is interpreted in modern times through theories particularly when such behaviour falls within the parameter of social activities directly or indirectly influencing groups of people. Human activities in organisations are influenced by personal convictions which run contrary at times leading to disagreement between parties concerned.

Keywords: Communication Tools, Industrial Conflict Management Handling Strategies, Theories.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian University system has been consistently facing disagreement over issues bordering on working conditions of workers, social welfare, beliefs and ideologies. Agbonna, Yusuf and Onifade (2009) state that like every other organisation, the work force of Universities in Nigeria persistently show concern on distribution of power, resources, non-implementation of previous agreements, poor university funding and disparity in salary, retirement age and non-implementation of government support for the sector. These incessant disagreements however have resulted in protracted disharmony in management staff interpersonal rela-

tionship, increased indiscipline among students, disarmed school authorities, distrusted academic calendar, unfavourable learning environment and shortfall in human capital development (Agbonna, 2009; Alabi 2002; Oguntuase 1999; Olugbile, 2005).

According to Ndum, Etim and Okey (2013) the incessant occurrence of these disruptions and the attendant consequences are indicators of ineffectiveness of the strategies adopted to deal with the recurring challenge of industrial conflict. Odiagbe (2011) notes that these disagreements exist because there is lack of understanding of the issues as well as the mechanisms to respond to them. As a result, the la-

bour has consistently view the several contentions over issues as brutal oppression by the authorities because their approaches have always lacked shared feelings, ideas, information and openness. Although, past studies have been conducted on industrial conflict in the Nigerian Universities like the studies by Agbonna, Yusuf and Onifade (2009) on communication and conflict manager's personality in school security and conflict management, Odiagbe (2011) on industrial conflict in Nigerian Universities focussing on disputes between the academic staff union of Universities (ASUU) and the federal government of Nigeria; and Ndum and Okey (2013) on conflict management in the Nigerian University system not much research have focussed on the influence of communication factors on industrial conflict management handling strategies in the Nigeria University system. Therefore, this study focuses on communication factors and industrial conflict management handling strategies in state owned universities in the south-west Nigeria. In achieving the objectives of this article, the study poses the following research questions:

- what are the communication factors influencing conflict management in state owned Universities in south-western Nigeria?
- is there any relationship between communication factors and industrial conflict management strategies in state owned Universities in south-western Nigeria?

The study also hypothesises that: There is no significant relationship between organisational communication factors (communication openness, information adequacy and regularity, information quality and reliability, pattern of information flow, participative management) and industrial conflict management styles adopted in state-owned Universities in south-western Nigeria.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organisational information theory by Weick (1969) explains the main activity of organisation as the process of making sense of equivocal information. Members of organisations accomplish this sense making process through enactments, selection and retention of information. Organisational members are successful to the extent that they are able to reduce equivocality through understanding (West and Turner, 2000). This theory is quite relevant to this research work in the sense that organisations particularly universities operate through information dissemination and flow which have great influence on the relationship of the workers and management in the course of their daily assignments. Such information determine the execution of organisational goal(s) or otherwise. The in-ambiguity of communication within and across the organisation will create a communication climate where members will perceive purposes clearly and thus reduce friction.

Media richness theory proposes that communication media have vary-

ing capacities for resolving ambiguity, negotiating varying intentions and facilitating understanding. Two main assumptions of this theory are: people want to overcome equivocality and uncertainty in organisations and a variety of media commonly used in organisations work better for certain tasks than others. Daft, Lengel, and Trevino cited in Hodge, Anthony and Gales (1996) presented a media richness hierarchy, arranged to illustrate the capacity and richness of media types to process communication in organisations. They were listed as; the availability of instant feedback; the capacity of the channel to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone and reflection; the use of natural language; and the personal focus of the channel. Face to face communication is the richest communication in the hierarchy followed by telephone, electronic mail, letter, memo, and bulletin. From a management perspective, the media richness theory suggests that rational choices are with particular communication channels to specific objective or task. This is significant as it expresses the value of negotiation in facial contacts over all other forms of discussion which remains the major means of interaction on issues of conflict.

3. TREND OF INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

According to Anekwe (2013) conflicts in the Nigerian universities are linked to several factors. These include wages and related issues; conditions of service; discipline, interpretation or viola-

tion of agreement; non-recognition of unions and anti-union activities. Porter, Bingham and Simmonds (2008) posited that communication failure is also a cause of conflict in employer-employee relations. And non-clarity of communication in Nigerian universities poses a great threat to industrial harmony and smooth running of academic programmes. In the opinion of Ejiogu in Ndum, Victor Etim and Stella-Maris Okey (2013), the incessant industrial conflicts in the Nigerian universities do not only occur periodically, it has assumed a particular trend. These are conflicts due to hierarchy of positions, conflicts based on the relationship between the objective state of affairs and the perceived state of affairs by conflicting parties and conflicts based on antagonistic source. The first trend occurs in form of subordinate, super-ordinate or lateral conflicts. In these cases, conflicts arise from friction between boss and subordinate, between the administrator and an authority over him or between an administrator and his peer.

4. CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is sharing our feelings, ideas and opinions with others. This can be intellectual, personal, spoken or written in nature. According to Awo-tua-Efebo (2001) communication connotes the conveyance of information or knowledge from one person to another. Communication is interactive by nature. The importance and meaning of communication pertain to the fact that receivers and senders of messages are connected through space and

time. Communication as a process has two participants – the sender of the message and the receiver of the message. When these messages are transmitted, they activate the person and this response is the purpose of communication. Communication motivates, informs, suggests, warns, orders, changes behaviour, and establishes better relationships, to make interaction meaningful and make oneself understood.

The etymological source mentions that 'communication' is derived from the Latin term 'communicare', which means to impart or participate. Communication is a process that allows us to exchange information by several methods. Communication is the process by which individuals promote meaning in the minds of others by means of verbal or nonverbal messages (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996).

The most uncomplicated conceptualisation of communication can be found within the Encoder/Decoder paradigm, in which communication is described as the transfer of information by means of a code (Ivancevich, 2002), where communicators understand each other based on shared social and communicative cues. However, where this is in short supply, conflict ensues. Communication requires that all parties understand a common language that is exchanged. There are auditory means, such as speaking or singing, and nonverbal, physical means, such as body language, sign language, paralanguage, touch, eye contact, or the use of writing.

5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNICATION AND INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT

In every human interaction that involves two or more people, communication is important. Imobigbe (1993) observes that in all human societies, communities, organisations and interpersonal relationships where regular interaction takes place, conflict happens. Further, McNamara (2007) identifies that issues of information usage as sources of conflict in workplace are employees not informed of new decisions and programmes and employees are not involved in decision making. As a result, such inadequate or ineffective information may be good ground for conflict to erupt.

Conflict Research Consortium (2008) states that even in ordinary circumstances, people often say things that are not interpreted in the way the statement was intended. When people are angry with each other, the likelihood of misinterpreting information is greatly increased to the point where conflict is almost inevitable.

6. TREND OF COMMUNICATION IN ORGANISATIONS

6.1. Downward communication:

In this type of communication, superiors communicate with their sub-ordinates and it is directive in nature. Orders, commands, comments, memos, rules and regulations, etc., come in to this category.

6.1. Upward communication:

This communication is processed from sub-ordinates to their superiors. This gives feedback to the employer or management. Sometimes this feedback or upward communication helps the superiors to carry out downward communication.

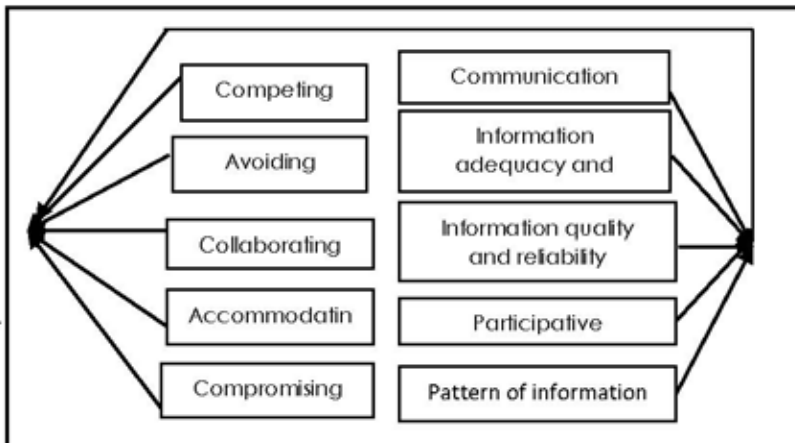
6.3. Lateral communication:

It is also termed as horizontal communication. This includes interaction and communication between the sub-ordinates of same cadre. To interlink activities of different branches, lateral communication is very helpful. It always avoids the

small delays caused by downward communication (Ashalatha,).

The foregoing demonstrates that communication is complex and requires a good measure of dexterity, relationship building and participation to build trust otherwise there will be conflict (Putnam, 2006). Severin and Tankard (1992) state that a theory is a representation of the real world which serves as basis for research. Organisational information theory, as a communication theory, explains the causes of conflict in organisations while media richness theory gives insight to why the choices of means of communication have definite reactions over one another.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of organisational communication factors and industrial conflict management



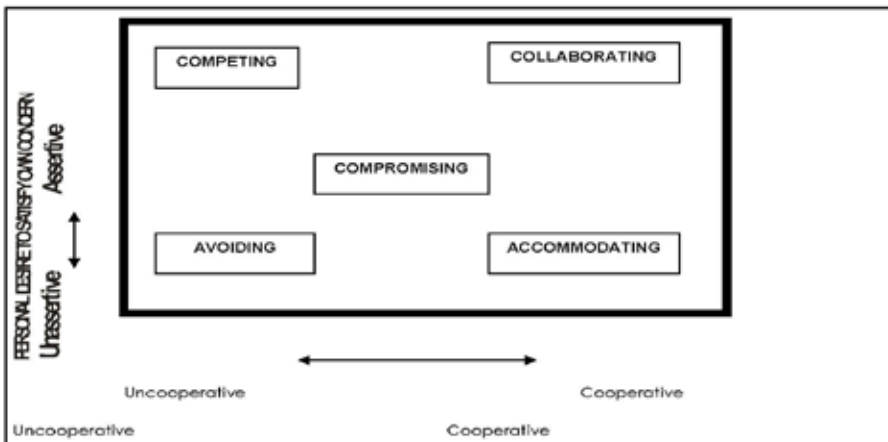
Source: Akinsanya (2010)

7. INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT HANDLING STYLES

Conflict in organisations come in different forms and thus require several approaches in addressing it. Kuhn and Poole (2000) define conflict handling style as a general and consistent orientation toward the other party and the conflict issues, manifest in observable behaviours that form a pattern and share common characteristics over time. They classify the conflict handling styles as avoidance, distributive and integrative approaches as the most replicated and understood. The distributive style is a confrontational approach with a party conceding to the other. Putnam and Wilson (1982) state that other commonly used tactics in this style include; directive communication about the issue; persistent argument for one's own position; and

attempt to take control of the interaction. The integrative style is one in which the parties employ cooperative behaviours to pursue mutually favourable resolutions. This implies arriving at a position or solution acceptable to all concerned parties. However, conflict is often best understood by examining the consequences of various behaviours at moments in time. The behaviours in reaction to conflict are usually categorised along two basic dimensions: assertiveness that implies the individual concern or interest above others, while cooperativeness connotes the individual interest for others and himself/ herself (Akanji, 2005). These two dimensions can be used to explain the five handling styles. Adler and Elmhorst (2002), and Akanji (2005) enumerate such methods in the following:

Figure 2: Conflict Handling Styles/Methods



Conflict Handling Methods:

There are conflict handling methods, i.e.

Competing, Accommodating, Avoiding, Compromising Collaborating and compromising

7.1 Competing

Competing is a style in which one's own needs are advocated over those of others. This method relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationship, and the use of coercive power. It tends to result in responses that increase the level of threat and is a very assertive method.

7.2 Accommodating

Accommodating, sometimes tagged smoothing, is the opposite of competing. This style is used by persons who yield their needs to those of others, being diplomatic. They allow the need of the group to overwhelm their own, though this may not be stated in attempting to preserve relationship perceived as important. This style is effective for short term resolution of conflict and solutions arising from such may be sources of future conflicts. This method seeks the cooperation of others

7.3 Avoiding

Avoiding is a descriptive behaviour that serves to minimise

addressing conflict explicitly, either ignoring it or quickly shifting conversation to a different issue. It can only be effective when the issues at stake are rather trivial, and this method is used to buy time. This is both unassertive and uncooperative. Such attempts get feelings pent up, as views go unexpressed making the conflict flourish until it becomes a burst like unattended tumor resulting in cancer.

7.4 Compromising

Compromising is the approach to conflict in which people grant concessions in a 'give and take' arrangement. This style can be effective when resources can be shared but may not be appropriate when values or principles are the source of conflict. Though it may seem satisfactory it is not usually satisfying to all. This attempt helps shape individual perception without wanting to understand the side very well. It breeds lack of trust avoiding risk.

7.5 Collaborating

Collaborating is pooling individual needs and goals towards common goal. It is called 'win-win problem solving'. Collaboration requires assertive communication and cooperation to achieve better solution than an individual could make alone.

7.6 Confronting

Confronting: In some conflict situations, parties may decide to slug it out with one another, taking violent dimensions which may lead to both parties losing or the most powerful having the victory.

8. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for the study was the descriptive survey research design of the ex post facto type. The reason for adopting the design was because the variables (Organizational Communication factors and Industrial Conflict Management) observed in this study is already in existence and no manipulation was done on the independent variables. A total of 921 participants were selected for this study from a population of four thousand five hundred and twenty-eight (4528) staff of the three selected universities i.e. Lagos State University, Olabisi Onabanjo University and Ladoke Akintola University of

Technology using simple random and proportionate stratified technique, management staff members. Others are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non Academic Staff Union (NASU) and the National Association of Academic Technologists. Thus, the sample comprised all the 5 management staff (Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Bursar and Librarian). Thus, the sample comprised all the 5 management staff (Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Bursar and Librarian). It also comprised 20% of the membership of ASUU (334), SSANU (191), NASU (361), and NAAT (20).

9. DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics including frequency counts, percentages and Multiple Correlation Matrix were used to analyse the data collected at 0.05 level of significance.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents

S/N	Institution	MGT	ASUU	SSANU	NASU	NAAT	TOTAL
1	LASU	5	120	100	72	8	305
2	LAUTECH	5	106	61	148	6	326
3	OLABISI ON-ABANJO	5	108	30	141	6	290
Total		15	334	191	361	20	921

Table 1 above indicates that from the total of 941 respondents 361 or 39.2% were NASU members, 334 or 36.3% were ASUU members, 191 or 20.7% were SSANU members 20 or 2.2% belong to NAAT while 15 or 1.6% were management staff.

Table 2: Demographic Information

S/N	DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES	Frequency	Percentage
	Unions		
1	NASU	361	39.2
2	ASUU	334	36.3
3	SSANU	191	20.7
4	NAAT	20	2.2
5	Management Staff	15	1.6
	Gender		
1	Male	577	62.6
2	Female	344	37.4
	Age		
1	20-29,	81	8.8%,
2	30-39,	307	33.3%,
3	40-49,	356	38.6%,
4	50-59	157	17%
5	60-65	20	2.2%.
	Academic Qualification		
1	O' Level	24	2.6
2	OND/NCE	105	11.4
3	Professional Certificate	123	13.3
4	HND/B.Sc	251	27.2
5	Higher Degree	412	44.7

Table 2 above shows that the respondents' gender was made up of 577 (62.6%) male and 344 (37.4%) female. Respondents within the age bracket of 20-29 were 81 (8.8%), 30-39 were 307 (33.3%), 40-49 were 356 (38.6%), 50-59 were 157 (17%) while 60-65 were 20 (2.2%). The table also show that 686 (74.5%) and 101 (11%) of the respondents were married and single respectively, while the divorced and separated were 55 constituted 6% respectively and 28 (3%) were widowed. The table shows that the category of staff with O/L certificate were 24 (2.6%), OND/ NCE were 105 (11.4%), professional qualification was 123 (13.3%), while those with HND/Bachelor degree were 251 (27.2%), while those with higher degrees were 412 (44.6%) of the respondents.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix of organisational communication factors and industrial conflict management in selected state-owned universities in Nigeria

Variable	Information Adequacy	Participatory Management	Communication Openness	Information Quality	Pattern of Information Flow
Competing p-value	0.72** 0.00	0.48** 0.00	0.68** 0.00	0.56** 0.00	0.53** 0.00

Avoiding p-value	0.66** 0.00	0.85** 0.00	0.50** 0.00	0.28** 0.00	0.26** 0.00
Collaborating p-value	0.82** 0.00	0.66** 0.00	0.98** 0.00	0.74** 0.00	0.72** 0.00
Accommodating p-value	0.49** 0.00	0.39** 0.00	0.70** 0.00	0.92** 0.00	0.82** 0.00
Compromising p-value	0.27** 0.00	0.09 0.19	0.48** 0.00	0.62** 0.00	0.73** 0.00

**** Significant p<0.05**

The results presented in table 2 reveal that there is positive correlation between the predictor variable of Information Adequacy (IA) with all the five conflict management handling styles: competing ($r = 0.73^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); avoiding ($r = 0.66^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); collaborating ($r = 0.82^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); accommodating ($r = 0.49^{**}$, $p < 0.05$) and compromising ($r = 0.27^{**}$, $p < 0.05$). Participatory management (PM) also correlated with all the five conflict management handling styles: competing ($r = 0.48^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); avoiding ($r = 0.85^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); collaborating ($r = 0.66^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); accommodating ($r = 0.39^{**}$, $p < 0.05$) and compromising which was not correlated ($r = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$). Communication openness (CO) also correlated with all the five conflict management handling styles: competing ($r = 0.68^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); avoiding ($r = 0.50^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); collaborating ($r = 0.98^{**}$, $p < 0.05$); accommodating ($r = 0.70^{**}$, $p < 0.05$) and compromising ($r = 0.48^{**}$, $p < 0.05$).

10 DISCUSSIONS OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The study revealed that there is relationship between organisational communication factors (such as information quality and regularity, information adequacy and reliability, pattern of information flow) and industrial conflict management. This finding is in consistency with findings of Trombetta and Rogers, (1994); Razali (1996), Zhu, May and Rosenfeld, (2004) who showed that these variables (information adequacy, participatory management, communication openness, information quality, and pattern of information flow) greatly influenced worker's

commitment to their organizations and organizational performance. Their findings are further extended by current findings, although with special focus in university communities, adding that organizational communication factors may reduce to a greater extent industrial bluffs and acrimony.

The study also shows that each of the organisational communication factors positively influenced industrial conflict management. Mohr and Spekman (1994), Larson and Kulchitsky (2000), Moy, Torres, Tanaka and McCluskey (2005), Ayoko and Pekerti, (2008) and Kandlousi, Ali and Abdollahi (2010)

found these variables as intervening in the communication process and foster persuasiveness as the basic ingredient of communication in conflict management from which other properties of constructive communication in conflict resolution stem. (Agbona et al, 2009).

The correlation matrix of the variable was found to be moderately positively correlated ($r=0.44^{**}$) with p- value less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$). This shows that information adequacy and regularity goes a long way in determining effectiveness of conflict management as there is relationship between information adequacy and regularity and conflict management. In consistence with the findings of Ayoko and Pekerti, (2008) communication openness correlated positively with conflict resolution and trust determining the conflict duration trust building in organisations.

Furthermore, the findings of Asekun-Olarinmoye, (2006) and Onifade, (2004) that show correlation between information reliability and conflict resolution, the result in table 3 above shows that information quality and reliability correlated positively with industrial conflict management. These are communication factors with significant composite effect on industrial conflict management in selected state-owned universities in South western Nigeria. The result shows that information ade

quacy, information quality, participatory management and information flow pattern which indicate that it in-

fluenced industrial conflict management. This is supported by the findings of Nordin, Sivapalan, Bhattacharyya, Ahmad and Abdullah (2014) that communication factors in organisations have positive correlation on conflicts resolution and overall communication climate.

11. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Industrial conflicts in Nigerian university system take different dimensions and have been persistent and managers of these institutions require dynamic approaches to manage them. This study has shown that organisational communication factors are key to managing conflict and their adoption has positive relationship with conflict management.

This study concludes that increasing adoption and use of these factors have increasing positive influence on success rate of conflict management in state owned universities in south west states. Therefore, the effective and efficient use of these factors by management of universities will promote industrial harmony, employee's welfare and increasing productivity.

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