Influence of Collaborating Conflict Management Strategy on Employee Productivity at the Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology, Kenya

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Abstract: Conflicts are an everyday phenomenon in organizations around the world. In higher education institutions, especially in Kenya, conflicts have become so rampant. Conflicts in these institutions can have a constructive or destructive effect that have a causal sequence on the productivity of employees and the institutions as a whole. The intent of any organisation should be to manage the conflict so that it is constructive for the organisation. The aim of this study was to examine the influence of collaborating conflict management strategy on employee productivity at the Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology (RVIST). The target population consisted of 293 teaching and non-teaching employees out of which a sample of 166 participants was selected using the stratified random sampling method out which 134 were able to completed the study. Purposive sampling was used to sample managers who participated in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data was obtained from the participants using survey questionnaires and interviews respectively. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and the Pearson correlation test. Qualitative data was categorised into themes and presented in form of narratives and themes. Findings show that interpersonal and intergroup are the main types of conflict at the organization. Pearson correlation test showed that collaborating conflict management strategy had a significant and positive influence on employee productivity. The organization leadership should focus on addressing interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. To improve employee productivity, leaders at the institution should promote the use of collaborating strategy of managing conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Management, Collaborating Strategy, Employee Productivity.

INTRODUCTION

The aspect of conflict has been there since time immemorial. Conflict is deemed as a social concept. Rahim [1] asserts that when two or more social entities come into contact with one another, then, conflict becomes inevitable. Therefore, Rahim defines conflict as interests that are divergent. Interactions between people make conflict a natural phenomenon. In organisations, conflicts are to be anticipated. This is owed to the differences in interests and ideas that are held by different people such as the staff and the managers. Different ideas inside individual may result to intrapersonal conflict, between individuals' results to interpersonal conflict [2]. On the other hand, conflict in a group results to intragroup conflict and between groups into intergroup conflict.

The employees are becoming more interdependent in the way that they work and this necessitates interpersonal interactions. Rahim [1], points out that conflict can be functional or dysfunctional in organisations. Discords, disagreements, and frictions in organisations have the tendency to escalate if not well managed. The inevitability of conflicts in organisations makes its management an absolute necessity if the organisation is to be productive in achieving its goals [3]. This has led to conflict resolution practitioners coining the word 'conflict management' which involves designing strategies that are effective in minimising dysfunctional conflict and enhancing functional conflict so as to bring out organisational productivity and development [4].

Conflict management presents a means for people to deal with conflicts that are ever present in organisations. Conflict management mechanisms are linked to the productivity of individuals, groups and the organisation at large. It sustains the development of an organisation especially in a culturally diverse organisation such as a higher education institution. Robbins and Judge [5], suggest that in managing conflict, attention should be paid to communication, structure and personal variables. High diversity inclination was found to be associated with higher conflict development in the institution. Omisore and Abiodun [6] opine that conflict management should be geared towards dealing with structural and personal factors in the organisation. Similarly, Mezrig and

Bouguesri [7] state that conflict revolves around conflict management, the structure of the organisation and interpersonal interactions.

Different organisations have environments that vary and so the management of conflict also varies. However, when properly managed, conflict in organisations becomes a development concept as it is entwined with organizational effectiveness, performance, and productivity. Employees become adept in their daily tasks and they become focused on organisational development. A study by Wanjere, Egessa, and Kagucia [8], indicates that conflict management is an important aspect that when properly instituted in an orgnaisation, can lead to productivity of the employees, their departments and the organisation as a whole.

The Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology (RVIST) was established in 1979 in Nakuru County, Kenya. The vision for the institute was to provide quality technical research and development so as to bring about industrialisation in the region. Today, RVIST is an institute of Higher Education that provides tertiary education and operates under the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. In Nakuru County, RVIST plays a significant role in youth education that has contributed to not employment of youths in the public and private sectors. It has also led to an entrepreneurial spirit in the youth who are becoming job creators. As at December 2017, the institution had offered over 42 different courses that includes Diploma, Craft and Artisan Programs. According to the institute's internal records, employee conflicts were a common case scenario in the organisation. This study seeks to examine the extent to which employees make use of collaborating strategy to manage conflicts and how it affects their productivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Conflict management is a way of disrupting conflicts that cause disturbances and providing satisfactory and acceptable solutions to deal with the conflicts [9]. It distinguishes between conflict that should be purged and conflict that is useful. This involves developing the ability of individuals to be more productive. Whether an organization is simple or complex, it faces conflicts in one way or another and so, it has a range of mechanisms for conflict management. Conflict management mechanisms are built into the organisational structure. Thus, a manager or administrator consciously utilises the mechanisms so as to influence conflict development.

Conflict management provides individuals in an organisation a way to be able to foster effective communication and problem-solving abilities so as to attain the organisation's goals [1]. In this breath, Stanley and Algert [10] state that in higher education institutions the conflict management strategies used

structures and interpersonal interactions are components of conflict management. Although Bowman [11] is of the opinion that conflict has no place in the academic environment because of its negativity on productivity, Balay [12] maintains that it is an important tool for organisational development when properly and effectively managed. Constructive management of conflict leads to positive performance and productivity while poor management polarises the environment and leads to poor productivity characterised by poor teamwork and cohesion. It requires managers to endorse attitudinal and behavioural elements while attending to interpersonal and departmental requirements [13].

Kilmann and Thomas [14] came up with the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management strategies model. These strategies include competing, compromising, collaborating, accommodating, and avoiding. This model acknowledge that in a conflict situation, there are usually two concerns: for self and for the other party; and assertiveness to satisfy own concerns. The conflict management strategy mainly dependent on which concern the employee prioritized during conflict management. The collaborating conflict management strategy entails trying to balance the concerns for self and for othre parties in order to get a win-win situation [6]. Literature suggest that the use of collaborating strategy in managing conflicts promote employee productivity. Employee productivity can be defined as employee achievement of operations that are inert and sustainable in the organisation. When an organisation meets the targets set out without fail, then it is said to be productive [15]. Employee productivity is concerned with the output of the employees and this is determined by the way they work.

Collaboration is also known as a problem-solving or integrating strategy that seeks to ensure that the differences that bring about conflict are worked upon and that everybody feels that they matter and that their viewpoints have been considered [1]. Constructive collaboration is vital so as to understand the preferences of the conflicting parties and engage everyone in finding constructive solutions. Working together enhances co-operation and this brings about productivity of the employees. Parties can opt to collaborate so as to achieve both their goals and a win-win situation. There is a lot of trust that is exercised so as to attain a consensus. Consensual decision-making addresses the tasks to be performed. There is mutual respect for one another and a self-worth attitude is established. The parties have concern for self and for others and this has a mutual advantage undertone [5]. This approach is used when other essential issues take center stage and the problem of the conflict is deemed unimportant. Using this strategy, however, is quite time-consuming. It is also hard to get to a point in which every person on each party accepts ideas that are presented. When, implemented well, this strategy has a positive effect on productivity because of the morale

that is place on the employees which increases their input. This is also realised in an increase in the output of the organisation.

According to Baumgardner [16], there is an open-discussion of the issues that are being faced. The parties then get to brainstorm on these issues and team work ensues. This conflict management strategy reveals the functional effects of conflict. There is commitment of the team members and as they work together and brainstorm, creative ideas are created. These ideas make room for innovations in different dimensions in the organisation. The labour and effort asserted in the implementation of the innovations leads to organisational productivity. Implementing this strategy requires the organisational structure to be flexible enough to allow the integration of the employees' ideas. Additionally, Baumgardner [16] contends that collaboration yields the best outcomes for an organisation and can lead to good performance of the organisation. This translates to productivity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the survey research design. This study targeted the 293 employees found at the Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology. This population comprises of 168 teaching and 125 non-teaching staff. Krejcie and Morgan's 1970 formula is used so as to determine the sample size that would provide an accurate representation of the population. The formula determined that the appropriate sample size would be 166 staff. Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained open-ended and close-ended questions and targeted the staff. The stratified random sampling technique was used to select the questionnaire respondents. The participants were categorized into two non-overlapping cadres of teaching and non-teaching staff. The semi-structured interviews targeted the managers/ administrators within the institution. The purposive sampling method was used to sample managers to be interviewed. There were ten managers in the institution and four were sampled. The managers were selected based on their expertise, the duration of service in the institution, and availability. Items in the questionnaire that were closed-ended were analysed using the descriptive statistics such frequencies and percentages. Open-ended questions and interviews were grouped according to the study's objectives and presented in form of narratives. The relationship between the study variables was tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation method.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

The researcher distributed a total of 166 questionnaires to employees of RVIST. Out of these, 134 were dully completed and returned to the researcher. This figure translates to a questionnaire return rate of 80.7%. According to Mugenda and Mugenda [17] a response rate of above 70% is

excellent. The nonresponses were mainly due to the timing of the data collection exercise towards the end of the semester where most of the staff hard quite busy schedules.

Demographic Information of Respondents

Of the 134 questionnaire respondents, 75 (56%) were male while 59 (44%) were female. The mean age of the respondents was 35.6 years. There was noteworthy age diversity in the sample with the youngest individual being 25 years and the oldest being 52 years old. In terms of level of education, 47.7% of the employees had bachelors degree, 35% had vocational training, and 14.2 had the secondary level of education. Respondents had worked at the organization for an average of 5.57 years. The respondent with the shortest work duration had worked in the organisation for one year while the longest serving employee had worked in the organisation for 17 years. Of the 134 questionnaire respondents, 77 (57%) were teaching staff while the remaining 57 (43%) were nonteaching staff.

Influence of Collaborating Strategy on Employee Productivity

The objective of the study was to examine the effect of collaborating strategy on employee productivity. The aim was to establish the extent to which the sampled employee utilises the collaborating strategy to resolve conflicts and compare it with his or her productivity level. The use of collaborating strategy was measured using a Likert scale comprising of three statements rated on a five point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The respondent rating on each of three statements was summed up to obtain an aggregate score for this parameter. The lowest possible score was 3, which would be obtained if the respondent ticked on strongly disagree option for the three statements (1x3). The highest possible score was 15, which would be obtained if the respondents ticked in strongly agree option on all the three statements (5x3). Table-1 presents key statistics regarding respondents' scores on this variable:

Table-1: Statistics on Respondents Collaborating Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collaborating Score	134	3.00	15.00	10.7388	2.90431

As Table-1 above illustrates, the mean score for this variable was 10.7388 out of a possible score of 15. This suggests that the collaborating strategy is widely utilised by the respondents. The minimum score

was 3 suggesting that there were individual within the sample who made little use of this strategy. There were also individuals who recordedto the maximum possible score of 15. To establish the relationship between collaborating strategy and productivity, these scores were compared to productivity scores using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. Productivity scores were obtained in same way as the collaborating scores. Respondents rating on each statement in the productivity likert scale were summed up to obtain an aggregate productivity score. Since the Likert scale for productivity contained 6 statements, the lowest possible score was 6 while the highest possible score was 30. Table-2 presents the Pearson Correlation results for the relationship between the two variables (collaborating strategy and productivity).

Table-2: Correlation between Collaborating Strategy and Productivity

		Productivity Score
Collaborating Score	Pearson Correlation	.310**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	134

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient usually ranges from -1 to +1. The Coefficient for the relationship between collaborating strategy and employee productivity noted in Table 2 above is 0.31. Since the value is positive, it indicates that the relationship between collaborating strategy and employee productivity is positive. This implies that when the use of collaborating strategy increases the level of employee productivity will also increase. The p-value for this relationship is 0.000. Since this value is less than 0.01, it implies that the relationship between collaborating strategy and employee productivity is statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance. To further interrogate this issue, respondents were asked whether working together to solve conflicts help them to manage most problems in a close-ended, yes/ no question. Out of the 134 respondents, 127 representing 94.8% of the sample affirmed that collaborating during conflict resolution help solve problems within the organisation.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to highlight how they collaborate during conflict resolution. Three major themes emerged from their responses and the dominant theme on this subject was open discussion, which refers to informal dialogue held by the employees with aim of resolving conflict amongst themselves. About 47 employees refer to this approach with some using other vocabularies such as communication, listening to each other, mutual agreement, and talking. Another theme that was highlighted referred to the use of formal departmental meetings to resolve conflicts that occur between employees. About 36 respondents mentioned that they

often use department forum to iron out differences and problems. The third major theme entailed the use of mediation, whereby a third party was brought in to help resolve the issue between the conflicting parties.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the effect of five collaborating conflict management strategy on employee productivity. The study concluded that the collaborating strategy of managing conflict has a statistically significant and positive influence on the productivity of employees at RVIST. This implies that promoting this approach of managing conflict will improve employees' productivity at the institution. The study therefore concluded that when employees are engaged in open communication, have frequent meetings, are willing to listen to other employees ideas, accept other peoples views at the expense of ones views, and agree on middle ground of conflict management, they tend to make conflict a functional aspect of development.

The study concluded that the competing strategy of managing conflict and avoidance strategy of managing conflicts has a statistically significant and negative influence on the productivity of workers at RVIST. This implies that promoting this approach of managing conflicts will reduce employees' productivity. To improve productivity, the leaders at the institution should promote the use of collaborating conflict management strategy. Future studies should consider replicating this research in other institutions of higher learning in order to support the generalision of these findings.

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