Research Paper

AVOIDING STYLE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKPLACE HARMONY

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS:

Organisations, employee, indispensable, employees, workers, conflict management

Organisations are faced with enormous conflict management challenges with the attendant consequences on workplace disharmony which impacts negatively on the organisational performance and the nation's Gross Domestic Product. This study therefore investigated the nature of the relationship between avoiding as a conflict management style and workplace harmony in Nigeria with particular emphasis on the Niger Delta. Breaking this broad objective into achievable form, the following specific objectives emerged: first, to determine the effect of avoiding, as a conflict management style on employee turnover in organizations; and second, to ascertain the effect of avoiding, as a conflict management style on picketing in organizations. A total of 180 respondents drawn from five major organisations operating in the Niger Delta participated in the study. The research hypotheses formulated in line with the specific objectives were tested with simple linear regression. The findings indicate the following: first that avoiding, as a conflict management style has a significant effect on employee turnover in organizations in the Niger Delta; second, that avoiding, as a conflict management style has a significant effect on picketing in organizations in the Niger Delta. The study concludes that organizations should not overuse the avoiding conflict management style if business organization must enjoy optimum level of workplace harmony.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Conflict management as a process of fostering industrial peace and harmony has in the recent times become the focus of resource management practitioners. For an organisation to remain successful, the employees are required to work in harmony with the management to achieve the set goals. Therefore, the establishment and continuous existence of viable organizations require effective functioning of its material inputs, with the human component of the input being indispensable. Thomas and Kilmann (1976) developed a model for handling conflict that adopts five styles: competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating and compromising. The competing style is high in concern for self, which is characterized by a drive to maximize individual gain, even at the expense of others. This style is in contrast to the collaborating style, which constructs solutions to conflict to meet the needs of all parties involved. The avoiding style is low in concern for self and disengages from conflict. The

accommodating style sacrifices self-interests to satisfy the needs of others. Finally, compromising theoretically straddles the midpoint between cooperativeness and assertiveness, and involves making concessions to arrive at a resolution of conflict.

Nigeria has recently witnessed a huge increase in the number of industrial actions. Hardly will a day pass in Nigeria without a report of strikes or threats of strikes in one form or the other. This development is not very healthy for workplace harmony and the entire economy in general. It seems that the incessant industrial disputes in Nigeria always result because managers in Nigerian organizations do not factor in employees in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes. Consequently, when conflict eventually erupts, managers resort to the use of avoiding option of the conflict management styles. Those in the public organisations achieve this through the use of state machineries to have their easy way out of the conflict while their counterparts in the private organizations resort to the use of threat of sack or outright sack of employees. The Punch Newspaper (January 9, 2017)

reported that angry workers of Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (DESOPADEC), on Monday the 9th day of January, 2017, disrupted work at the Warri head office.

The workers besieged the commission's secretariat in their hundreds, barricaded the gate and distracted business activities over unpaid End of Year Bonus and other entitlements. The workers accused the state government and management of the board of the interventionist agency for oil producing communities in the state of maltreating workers through its refusal to pay workers including the controversial 13-month bonus (End of Year Bonus). They also said the management refused to promote and pay retirement entitlements to pensioners of the commission as well as leave bonuses to workers of the commission since 2015 when the present board assumed office. The aggrieved workers promised to continue with their protest until the state government listened to their demands and ensure that staff welfare was prioritized. In the same vein, on May 3rd 2017, protesters **from Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), Delta State Chapter shut down activities in the oil city of Warri and its neighboring Effurun town.** Major activities in these two cities were brought to stand still as business owners and offices closed for the day either in solidarity with the protesters or probably to prevent vandals from disrupting their businesses. The resultant effect of this conflict management style adopted by managers in public and private organizations in Nigeria is low industrial/workplace harmony and employee turnover. This is crux of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES
Organisational Conflict

Azamosa (2004) says industrial conflict involves the total range of behaviour and attitudes that is in opposition between individual owners and managers on one hand and working people on the other. However, there are many sources of organisational conflicts as categories by Jones et al (2003) with each category having its unique characteristics. Workplace conflict has been defined in several ways by many authors. Obi (2012) defined workplace conflict as anact of discontentment and contention which either the workers oremployers of labour utilize to put excessive pressure against each other so as to get their demands. This view is consistent with Ikeda, Veludo and Campomar (2005) descriptions of workplace conflict as a dispute that occurs when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible with each other in organizations. On this premise, workplace conflict within the context of employment relationship can be regarded as an inevitable clash of interests and resulting disputes of varying intensity between and within any or all of the active actors in organizations. Thus, in the absence of common values in organizations, conflict is bound to occur.

Though conflict is generally perceived as something devastating, abnormal, dysfunctional and detestable, yet it could be a precursor of positive change if constructively handled (Hammed & Ayantunji, 2002). As a concept, conflict has been subjected to diverse definitions by various scholars based on the context and their understanding of the concept. Fisher et al (2004) defined conflict as a relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have or think they have incompatible goals. It therefore implies that conflict

is a continuo us interaction that span through lifetime of man and not just a one-off relationship.

Avoiding Style of Conflict Management
Avoiding style (low concern for self and others) has been associated with withdrawal, buck passing, or sidestepping situations. An avoiding person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. This style may be used when the potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs the benefits of the resolution of conflict Pruitt's (1983). This may be used to deal with some trivial or minor issues or a cooling off period is needed before a complex problem can be effectively dealt with. This style is inappropriate when the issues are important to a party. This style is also inappropriate when it is the responsibility of the party to make decisions, when the parties are unwilling to wait, or when prompt action is required Pruitt and Carnevale (1993).

Conflict in organizations is often avoided and suppressed because of its negative consequences and to seek to preserve consistency, stability and harmony within the organization (Nadler and Tushman, 1999). Such situations necessitate conflict to be studied empirically focusing on its appearance, causes, consequences, emotional, cognitive, motivational and behavioural aspects (Nauta and Kluwer, 2004).To function effectively at any level within organizations conflict management skills are important prerequisites. Therefore, being aware of the extent of conflict at various levels of an organization is crucial for the management of organizations. Too little conflict results in organizational stasis, while too much conflict reduces the organization's effectiveness and eventually immobilizes its employees (Marquis and Huston, 1996).

Conflict management has grown into a major subfield of organizational behaviour. Conflict resolution is prescribed not simply as a mechanism for dealing with differences within an existing social system, but also as an approach that can facilitate constructive social change toward a responsive and equitable system (Fisher, 2000). Organisational conflicts, according to Jones et al (2003), could arise between individuals or groups in an organisation if the goals are not specified or when the management shift blame to all or a unit(s) involved in work process. However, not all conflicts are bad and not all conflicts are good. People tend to view conflict as a negative force operating against successful completion of group or common goals. Conflict can create negative impact to group but may also lead to positive effects depending on the nature of the conflict. Hence, management are duty bound to resolve conflicts properly for the sake of increasing organizational performance because the result of such action will lead to good communication, time management, cooperation and increased organisational performance (Nadler and Tushman,1999).

Industrial crisis include any form of work discontent which show up in several ways such as absenteeism, go-slow, loss of man-hour, high labour turnover, work to rule, picketing, strike, sabotage, walk-in and sit–in, over time ban, high rate of sickness, lockout, suspension, and high

incidence of query issuance (Yesufu, 1982). Most of them are tools in the hand of the employees while only few (lockout, suspension and issuance of query) are used by the employers for discipline and to serve as deterrent for others. Industrial crisis could also be defined as work stoppage on the part of the employees to force their demands on the

employer(s) or to resist a particular demand/rule made by the employer.

When workers get disenchanted about their service and the organization can longer boast of the quality of workers' performance, then there is the existence of emotional hazards in their interests Pruitt, D. G. (1983). This situation flames industrial crisis because each party may tend to work to undo the other as against the traditional work relation of mutual benefits. Industrial crisis could be internal (between a particular organization and its unions) or external (between the association of employers and the national bodies of the unions). In this study, industrial crisis is used to capture the generality of unhealthy work relation, which could also mean industrial conflict, trade dispute or industrial actions (Ikeda, Veludo, & Campomar, (2005).

A good conflict improves decision outcomes especially if it is task-related conflict. Group productivity will increase through constructive criticism since most task related conflicts allow the exchange of ideas and assist better performance among work force. Various conflict management theories opine that a healthy conflict management system should integrate the internal sub-system with the higher level of the organisational hierarchy (Thomas, 1976).

Organizational conflict at the interpersonal level includes disputes between peers as well as supervisor-subordinate conflict. Party-direct mediation is a mediation approach particularly suited for disputes between co-workers, colleagues or peers, especially deep-seated interpersonal conflict, multicultural or multiethnic disputes. The mediator listens to each party separately in a pre-caucus or pre-mediation before ever bringing them into a joint session. Part of the pre-caucus also includes coaching and role plays (Tsevendorj, 2008).

The idea is that the parties learn how to converse directly with their adversary in the joint session. Some unique challenges arise when organizational disputes involve supervisors and subordinates. The Negotiated Performance Appraisal (NPA) is a tool for improving communication between supervisors and subordinates and is particularly useful as an alternate mediation model because it preserves the hierarchical power of supervisors while encouraging dialogue and dealing with differences in opinion (Alper, Tjosvold & Law, 2000).

Some of the causes that have being attributed to the spate of persistent industrial crisis in Nigeria include, *inter alia*, poor infrastructural base in the workplace, low level of motivation, insecurity of jobs, policy inconsistencies and variance in management styles, breach of collective agreement (Dauda, 2006). Tseveendorj (2008) observed that the Malaysia bank employees rated communication, perception, values and culture problems as moderately serious sources of conflict although the staff differed from the officers in their perception to the degree of seriousness of these problems.

Conflict in organizations is often avoided and suppressed because of its negative consequences and to seek to preserve consistency, stability and harmony within the organization (Nadler and Tushman, 1999). Such situations necessitate conflict to be studied empirically focusing on its appearance, causes, consequences, emotional, cognitive, motivational and behavioural aspects (Nauta and Kluwer, 2004).Thomas (1976) portrays "avoiding" as being low in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. When using this conflict mode a person knows there is a conflict but decides not to deal with it by

ignoring, sidestepping, being non-committal or withdrawing from the issue or interaction. It puts parties in a lose/lose relationship where a choice is made not to address the feelings, views or goals of either party. Efforts are made to evade or delay the confrontation, problem or disagreement rather than deal with it. The goal is to avoid the conflict, at least for the moment (Ma, 2007). Concluding from these points, the author hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis I

H_0: Avoiding, as a conflict management style does not have significant effect on employee turnover in business organizations.

Employee Turnover

Denvir and McMahon (1992) define labour turnover as the movement of people into and out of employment within an organization while Mobley (1982) defines turnover as "voluntary cessation of membership in an organization by an individual who receives monetary compensation for participating in that organization". Forbes (1971) states that labour turnover means separation from an organization and included promotion, transfer or any other internal movement within the institution. Korunka (2005) found a considerable negative alliance between job satisfaction and intent to leave. If employees are satisfied with their salary, environment of the job, future promotions and behaviour of fellow workers will be more committed to their work and in turn reduce job turnover intention.

Employee turnover is a process of individual who takes the material yield from the organization terminates organization membership (Zhang, and Li, 2002). Cost of employee turnover is always high; the cost including explicit cost (recruitment, training, productivity loss, etc.), hidden costs (low-morale, reduce enterprise reputation, damage position chain, loss of opportunity, etc.). Generally, employee turnover is grouped into two kinds: voluntary turnover and involuntary turnover. Voluntary turnover refers to decision mainly made by employees leaving the company, including all resignation forms; involuntary turnover refers to the decision of turnover mainly made by the enterprise, including fire, dismiss and other forms. For managers of enterprises, involuntary turnover can be predicted and controlled, but voluntary turnover tends to be unpredictable in advance. The influence of different types of employee turnover for enterprises is different, but too much voluntary turnover is adverse to organization.

The research history of employee turnover can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. The first scholars in the research field of employee turnover is the economist, they mainly stood in a macro perspective to study how wages, labor market structure and the unemployment rate influence employee turnover. Since the 1970s, industrial psychologists studied of employee turnover, they pointed out that there were shortages of economists' study: (1) the range of determinants that used to explain employee turnover was too narrow. It only emphasized the influence of economic factors on employee turnover, and little about non-economic factors; (2) their study was difficult to clarify how decisive influence factors (such as compensation) affected employee turnover. Different from economists, psychologists mainly stood on the micro perspective to study how hidden individual psychology variables influenced on employee turnover, they introduced the concepts that reflected individual different psychological feelings to analyze the decisive factors in

employee turnover, and then attempted to describe the process of psychological change of employees making turnover decision. These research perspectives played an important role in open "black box" of employee turnover's psychological motivation (Zhang, and Zhang, 2003).

Today, more and more scholars had paid close attention to turnover reason, but these studies only focused on one or two aspects of turnover influence factors. This article researched on the effect of avoiding on employee turnover from personal factor, organization and work factor. On the basis of the foregoing, the authors hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis II

H_0: Avoiding, as a conflict management style does not have significant have significant effect on picketing in business organisations.

METHODOLOGY

Survey design was adopted in this study and this enabled the opinions of managers and employees on how avoiding, as a conflict management style affects workplace harmony to be assessed. Therefore, the data collected through structured questionnaire were used in testing the hypotheses and making generalization on the population based on the results from the sample. The population sample of the study consisted of 180 members of staff who were randomly selected from the following organisations in the Niger Delta: C & I Leasing Nigeria Plc, Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission, Chevron Nigeria Limited, Total Nigeria, and Nigerian Agip Oil Company.

The questionnaire was divided into two main parts namely: section A, and section B. The section A part of the questionnaire elicited the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as gender, age, year of service, educational qualification, union membership. The section B part was sub-divided into two parts: question 1 to question 5 elicited responses from the respondents concerning avoiding, as conflict management style (independent variable) available to managers in organisations while question 6 to question 10 elicited responses from the respondents regarding workplace harmony (dependent variable).

This questionnaire used the five point Likert scale which ranges from Strongly Agree" with the highest score of 5 assigned to it, to "Undecided or Neutral" with the lowest score of 1 assigned to it.

To objectively test the hypotheses formulated, the whole analysis was done with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The simple linear regression analysis was also used to measure the level of significance of the effect of the exploratory variables on the criteria variables in the hypotheses formulated. The simple regression analysis was appropriate for the tests because it is used when the study involves models with just one dependent variable and one independent variable.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Hypothesis one

Hypothesis I

H_0: Avoiding, as a conflict management style does not have significant effect on staff turnover in business organizations.

Table4.15a. Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.882[a]	.725	.623	.3891	1.902

a. Predictors: (constant), avoiding style of conflict management
b. Dependent Variable: staff turnover

Table 4.15b. ANOVA[b]

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	88.347	1	28.216	67.182	0.001[a]
	Residual	62.081	21	3.242		
	Total	170.428	22			

a. Predicator: (Constant), avoiding style of conflict management
b. Dependent Variable: staff turnover

Table 4.15cCoefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	P
1 (Constant)	6.123	12.275		9.212	0.001
Avoiding style of conflict management	.582	3.312	.882	9.212	0.001

a. Dependent Variable: staff turnover

Table 4.15a and 4.15b shows that the analysis of variance of the fitted regression equation is significant with F value of 67.18; this is an indication that the variation explained is not due to chance. Since the p-value (0.001) is less than 0.05, it shows a statistically significant effect of the predictor on the indicator at 95 percent confidence level. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant effect is rejected. Thus, avoiding has significant effects on staff turnover in organizations. The R^2 statistic in Table 4.15a indicates that the model as fitted explains 72.5 percent of the total variability in staff turnover. In other words, 80.5 percent of the total variability in staff turnover is explained by avoiding style of conflict management. The value of $R^2 = 0.725$ shows that avoiding style of conflict predicts staff turnover. The standardized coefficients (Beta) value of 0.882 in Table 4.10c reveals that the independent variable is statistically significant at 0.05 which again, confirms that the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternative hypothesis accepted.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H_0: Avoiding as a conflict management style does not have significant effect on picketing in business organisations.

Table4.17a. Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.931a	.823	.523	.2891	1.802

a. Predictors: (constant), avoiding style of conflict management
b. Dependent Variable: picketing.

Table 4.15b. ANOVAb

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	72.047	1	28.216	7.282	0.001a
Residual	50.051	18	3.242		
Total	122.098	19			

a. Predicator: (Constant), avoiding style of conflict management
b. Dependent Variable: picketing

Table 4.15cCoefficientsa

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	P
1 (Constant)	7.366	8.134		4.102	0.001
Avoiding style of conflict management	.461	3.202	.931	4.103	0.001

Dependent Variable: picketing

Table 4.17a and 4.17b shows that the analysis of variance of the fitted regression equation is significant with F value of 7.28; this is an indication that the variation explained is not due to chance. Since the p-value (0.001) is less than 0.05, it shows a statistically significant positive effect of the predictor on the indicator at 95 percent confidence level and as such the null hypothesis of no significant effect is rejected. This follows that avoiding, as a conflict management style has significant effect on picketing in business organisations. The R^2 statistic in Table 4.17a indicates that the model as fitted explains 82.3 percent of the total variability in picketing rate. In other words, 93.1 percent of the total variability in picketing rate is explained by avoiding, as a conflict style management. The value of $R^2 = 0.823$ shows that avoiding, as a conflict management style predicts picketing rate. Again, the standardized coefficients (Beta) value of 0.931 in Table 4.17c reveals that the independent variable is statistically significant at 0.05.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results from the tests indicate that avoiding, as a conflict management style has significant effects on industrial actions and picketing in business organizations in the Niger Delta. These results are consistent with the work of Rahim (1983) and Thomas et al (1972) which posit the avoiding style is when you do not satisfy your concerns or the concerns of the other person. This style is low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. The goal is to delay. This style usually makes employees to be disenchanted consequently resign their jobs. Avoidance is also appropriate when you are in a low power position and have little control over the situation, when you need to allow others to deal with the conflict, or when the problem is symptomatic of a much larger issue and you need to work on the core issue. To develop skills in this style use foresight in knowing when to withdraw, learn to sidestep loaded questions or sensitive areas by using diplomacy, become skillful at creating a sense of timing, and practice leaving things unresolved. Overuse of the avoidance style can result in a low level of input, decision-making by default, and allowing issues to fester, which can produce a breakdown in communication between team members. This can inhibit brainstorming sessions from being productive and can prevent the team from functioning. People who overuse avoidance feel they cannot speak frankly without fear of repercussions. The overuse of conflict avoidance can often be a result of childhood experiences, past work-related incidents, and negative experiences with conflict resolution. Behaviours associated with the overuse of avoidance include being silent,

sullen, and untruthful when asked if something is wrong being. A milder form of avoidance behavior is when the team member procrastinates about getting work done and deliberately takes an opposing point of view inappropriately during a decision-making situation, or is timid, withdrawn, or shy. Extreme behaviours can occur when avoidance is overused. A person begins to be negative, critical and sarcastic. Other extreme avoidance behaviours include becoming passive aggressive by being late and not paying attention at meetings. It also lends a greater importance to this style as compared to the other styles because you have devoted such a disproportionate amount of time to the style. Under use of the avoidance style results in hostility and hurt feelings. In addition, work can become overwhelming because too many issues are taken on at once, resulting in an inability to prioritize and delegate. When avoidance is underused a team member may deny that there is a problem and allow their hurt feelings to prevent communication. Avoiding method of conflict management pasists, employees may result to picketing is capable of harming the business through loss of customers and negative publicity, or by discouraging or preventing workers and/or customers from entering the site and thereby preventing the business from operating normally (Twarog, 2006). Picketing is a common tactic used by trade union during strikes, who will try to prevent dissident members of the union, members of other unions and non-unionised workers from working. Those who cross the picket line and work despite the strike are known pejoratively as scabs.

CONCLUSION

Avoiding as a conflict management style leads to picketing and industrial actions which harpers workplace harmony in organizations. This is so for the simple reason that managers applying the avoiding conflict management style do not satisfy the organisation's concerns or the concerns of the employees. This style is low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. The goal is to delay. This style usually makes employees to be disenchanted consequently resign their jobs. Overuse of the avoidance style can result in a low level of input, decision-making by default, and allowing issues to fester, which can produce a breakdown in communication between team members. This can inhibit brainstorming sessions from being productive and can prevent the team from functioning. Under use of the avoidance style results in hostility and hurt feelings. In addition, work can become overwhelming because too many issues are taken on at once, resulting in an inability to prioritize and delegate. When avoidance is underused a team member may deny that there is a problem and allow their hurt feelings to prevent communication. If avoiding style of conflict management persists, employees may result to picketing which is capable of harming the business through loss of customers and negative publicity, or by discouraging or preventing workers and/or customers from entering the site and thereby preventing the business from operating.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Managers must ensure the avoiding is use appropriate in order to prevent it from resulting staff turnover which is a huge cost the organisations.
2. Managers should minimize the use of avoiding, as a conflict management style because if often leads to picketing and industrial actions which harpers workplace harmony in organizations.

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This research focused on avoiding conflict management style and workplace harmony in organisations in the Niger. Therefore, further research will be required to predict when exactly each of the five conflict management styles should be used to boost workplace harmony.

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