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Conflict Management Styles Influencing Organizational Commitment among Kenya Seed Company Employees, Kenya

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Abstract

This study aimed at studying conflict management styles influencing employees' organizational commitment at Kenya Seed Company, Kenya. The objectives of the study were to investigate whether accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, compromising and competing styles influence organizational commitment. This study was anchored on the Dual Concern Model for determining the conflict management styles of disputants in conflict situations. The organizational commitment was studied as it has been discovered that institutions benefit most from this paradigm because it mainly improves productivity, organizational climate and enhance team cohesiveness. Case study research design was used and the target population comprised of 82 Seed companies registered in Kenya. Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI–II) was applied to assess the conflict handling styles, and adopted Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), developed by Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) to measure employees' commitment. Data was analyzed using descriptive techniques. The findings were presented in frequency distribution tables and bar graphs. The results of the study reveal that integrating, compromising and accommodating styles enhance commitment

towards the organization. On the other hand, employees perceived dominating and avoiding styles as lowering the sense of employee organizational commitment. The study recommends the need to institutionalize conflict management policies in employment contracts that guide employee participation.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Management Styles, Organizational Commitment, Kenya Seed Company

1.0 Statement of the problem

Conflict is a complex, regularly occurring and inevitable social phenomenon which permeates the fabrics of human and organizational life. Like other organizations, seed companies are susceptible to interpersonal conflict over many issues. There are misunderstandings, conflicts, personality clashes and petty jealousy (Lewis, 2007). Lack of conflict management impacts negatively on organizational commitment which to a large extent contribute immensely to failure of organizations not achieving their goals. Iravo (2011) found out that if school principals view conflict from a positive perspective, become alert and sensitive to sources of conflict and deal with conflict situations, then it would be possible to leverage these conflicts to improve cohesion and productivity within Kenyan secondary schools. Kenya Seed Company Limited provides seeds to Kenyan farmers and the entire East African region. It has been operating well utilizing both processing and storage facilities optimally with increased seed production campaign. However, in the recent past, this resource center started to degrade since output started diminishing due to impediments to smooth working, obstructions in decision making process and the formation of competing affiliations within the company.

Once being renowned as good achievements under the company, majority of departments have now been underperforming depicting that production, liquidity position as well as employee organizational commitment is adversely affected. Despite advances in conflict management strategies, many organizations including KSC continue to fail for a number of reasons. One of the main causes of failure is the lack of conflict management practice (Adler 2008). The need for effective conflict management is accepted among academicians and employers. Despite some study in the area of conflict management of institutions, the extent to which conflicts influences organizational commitment is yet to be known in a Kenyan context.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The study utilized the Dual Concern Model (DCM) for determining the conflict management styles of disputants in conflict situations in order to achieve the objectives of the study. This model explains the individual's preference of conflict handling style(s) and paves the way for a shift of focus from generalized predispositions to strategic choice dictated by the conflicting parties' conceptualization of the events. It argues that the specific choices that disputants make are a reflection of their concerns for the welfare of self and others. It states that conflict management is a function that combines the level of assertiveness with the level of cooperativeness, that is, a combination of the level of concern (high or low) for "self" with the level of concern (high or low) for "other" respectively.

A consideration of these combinations of concerns results in a set of conflict handling styles that disputants may choose. These include: (a) domination (forcing, competition or contending) in which there is high concern for self and low concern for other. Disputants engage in a win-lose relationship including persistent and persuasive arguments, verbal dominance, and positional commitment; (b) collaboration or integration in which there is high concern for self and other. Disputants are therefore likely to engage in constructive approach and willingness to resolve the conflict; (c) compromise is preferred in situations where disputants have moderate concerns for self and others and thus decide to split the difference or meet the parties' interests half-way; (d) avoidance or inaction is a preference chosen when disputants have low concern for self and other and thus fail to confront the problem and may not communicate with themselves or ignore their differences or simply withdraw from the scene; (e) accommodation or smoothing is chosen when disputants have low concern for self and high concern for other and as such are willing to yield or oblige in order to resolve the conflict. Shapiro and Kulick (2004) however note that with the exception of avoidance, all these set of behaviours or conflict managing styles require concession to be made by one or both parties.

2.1 Empirical framework

The Concept of conflict

For humans, conflict is considered to be an indicator for their existence and one measure of the degree of interaction with their daily life activities. In fact, a moderate amount of conflict, handled in a constructive manner, is essential for attaining and maintaining an optimum level of organizational effectiveness (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). According to Patzak, (2012), a conflict is essentially a clash of different expectations about something perceived to be important by at least one of the parties involved. Wilmont and Hocker (2001) identified conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities. It is therefore noted that no single definition of conflict exist, and that perception influences how conflict is viewed in different situations.

Conflict Management Styles

The Rahim's five styles of conflict handling model was based on both the grid of managerial styles proposed by Blake and Mouton, as well as the Thomas's five modes model. As pointed out by Rahim (2011), these dimensions portray the motivational orientations of individuals during conflict. Combination of these two dimensions results in five specific styles of managing conflict, as shown in Figure 1.
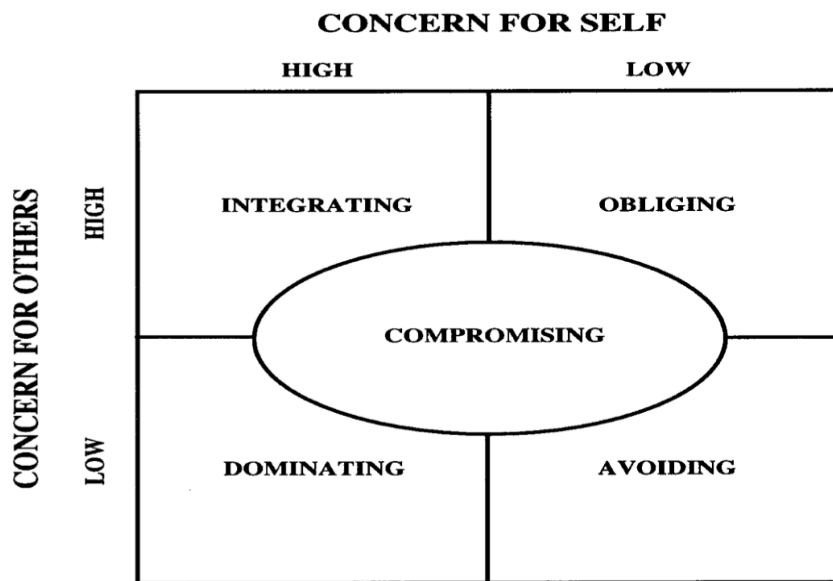
Sources: Rahim (2002); Boonsathorn (2007)

Figure 1. Styles of Conflict management.

2.1.2 Integrating style

Integrating or collaborating style of conflict management is linked with problem solving and involves openness, sharing information, searching for alternatives and examination of differences to reach an effective solution acceptable to both parties (Copley, 2008). Maier (2010), however noted that problem solving is the only method that is directed towards attitudinal, situational and behavioral components of conflict.

2.1.3   Accommodating style

The style is also called smoothing or obliging. According to Yuan (2007), accommodating style is linked with low concern for self and high concern for others and associates while attempting to play down the differences and focusing on relationships, cooperation and harmony. Therefore it requires an individual to put aside his/her needs to please the other party in a conflict situation.

2.1.4 Compromising style

This style intermediates between concern for self and others and typically involves bargaining "give and take" where both parties involved relinquish some aspect in order to obtain a unit solution (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). It is often used when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive or when both parties, who are equally powerful, such as a labour union and management, have reached a stalemate.

2.1.5   Dominating style

Dominating style, also labeled competing expresses high concern for self and low concern for others, meaning an impressing factor for accepting one situation (winner and loser) without any reason or discussion (Schermerhorn 2000). According to Gross & Guerrero, (2011), their study portrayed dominating style as a competing style in which the employees always sticks to their arguments that they are correct and always tries to win.

2.1.6 Avoiding style

Avoiding style involves low concern for self and others which is associated with a tendency for people, or groups in conflict to withdraw from the conflict situation or remain neutral. According to Lussier (2010), avoidance is being neither assertive nor co-operative and is commonly used by people who are emotionally upset by the tensions and frustrations of conflict. The style is often used when the potential consequences of confronting the other party seem to outweigh the benefit of resolving the conflict.

2.2 Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment refers to the extent to which an employee develops an attachment and feels a sense of allegiance to his or her employer (PSUWC, 2013). Allen and Meyer (1996) have defined organizational commitment as a psychological link between an employee and the organization that makes it less likely that the employee will voluntarily leave the organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) present three approaches and define the three dimensional constructs as affective, continuance and normative commitment:

Affective commitment refers to one's emotional attachment, identification and involvement in the organization based on ones belief in the organization (PSUWC, 2013). It enhances job satisfaction because employees agree with the organization's objectives and principles, because employees feel they are treated fairly in terms of equity, organizational care, concern, and support (Hawkins, 1998). Employees with low affective commitment prefer to leave the organization, while those with a high affective commitment will stay for longer periods, as they trust the organization and its mission.

Continuance commitment is employee commitment to stay longer in the organization due to high cost of leaving. This is manifested by an individual who maintains commitment to the organization because one is unable to match salary and/or benefits with another employer. The antecedents of this commitment include age, tenure, desire to leave and job satisfaction. Age and tenure can be the purpose of continuance commitment, mainly because of their roles as replacement measures of investment in the organization. Tenure has close relationship with workers, retirement costs, career investments and skills unique to the organization.

269

Normative commitment is described as an employee's feelings to stay with the organization because one owes it to the employer to stay out of a perceived obligation. . In turn, the employee feels indebted to the employer thus reciprocating loyalty and duty making it difficult for them to leave. The primary backgrounds of normative commitment are worker commitment including affective commitment and commitment behaviors, organizational dependability and participatory management that inspire feelings of moral responsibility to respond to the organization (Gross & Guerrero, 2011).

3.0 Research Design

In order to achieve the aim and objectives of the study, case study design was adopted because the study focus was cross-sectional. This was preferred because it produces much more detailed information than what is available through statistical analysis. Case study is comparatively a flexible method of scientific research because its project design seems to emphasize exploration rather than prescription or prediction to enable researchers to freely discover and address issues as they arise in their experiments. In addition, the looser format of case studies allow researchers to begin with broad questions and narrows their focus as their experiment progresses rather than attempt to predict every possible outcome before the experiment is conducted (Kothari, 2011).

3.1 The Target Population

The study population comprised of 82 registered seed companies which produce, distributes and market seeds in Kenya. Varieties of seeds produced include cereals, pastures, and vegetables and legumes (Kephis 2012).

3.2 The Sampling Design and Sample Size

The stratified sampling was used because it tries to improve the representativeness of the sample. Kenya Seed Company is located in Trans-Nzoia County and has a workforce of 360 permanent employees. Data was collected from permanent employees of Kenya Seed Company. The study sample comprised of (N =90) employees which included all female and male employees aged between 25– 60. Kramer (1991) argues that "at least 25% of the sample frame enables the researcher to collect enough data to warrant valid and informed generalizations and conclusions".

4.0 Research Findings

The main objective of the study was to determine conflict management styles influencing employees' organizational commitment at the seed companies in Kenya. Five specific objectives were formulated

4.1 Personal details of respondents

Data was collected using a five item demographic questionnaire which included gender, age, academic rank, department and length of service. By gender, 53.3% of the respondents were male while 46.7% were female. The highest proportion of respondents fell below 30 years old who accounted for 47.8% while the 31-40 years age group accounted for 37.8% and those above 40 years stood at 14.4%. As per education level 14.4% of the respondents had certificate, one third 33.3% had diploma while majority 44.4% had degree level of education. A few 7.8% had attained master's level of education. This shows that respondents were knowledgeable and well trained enough to understand the concept of conflict management. Respondents were drawn from various departments that included management, production, marketing and distribution. Most employees 47.8% were from production while 21.1% were from marketing department. Majority of employees 43.3% were experienced as they had served in the company for over 20 years while more than one third 37.8% had worked for between 11-20 years. A small proportion, 18.9% had less than 10 years working experience. This implies that most of the respondents have experienced organizational conflict and can proactively manage them.

Table 2: Personal Details of the Respondents.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	48	53.3
Female	42	46.7
Age		
< 30	43	47.8
31-40	34	37.8
> 40	13	14.4
Education level		
Certificate	13	14.4
Diploma	30	33.3
Bachelor	40	44.4
Masters	7	7.8
Department		
Management	14	15.6
Production	43	47.8
Distribution	19	21.1
Marketing	14	15.6
Length of service (years)		
≤ 10	17	18.9
11-20	34	37.8
> 20	39	43.3

Source: Field survey, 2015.

4.2 Obliging style and organizational commitment

The first question sought to assess the influence of obliging style on employee organizational commitment. The findings overwhelmingly shows that obliging style has a negative correlation (r= -.036) with organizational commitment not a positive correlation as stated in the question. The data did not support this statement.

4.3 Avoiding style and organizational commitment

The findings indicates that there is a negative association between avoiding and organizational commitment. (r= -.087) as the question stated. However, the P-value is (p= .210 > 0.05.) That means there was no significant correlation between avoiding style and organizational commitment. Montoya-Weiss, Massey and Song (2001), found that using this style will hurt relationship in a team. People usually let the conflict be lessened while time goes on. In fact, avoiding the problem does not make it go away, but make it worse.

4.4 Integrating style and organizational commitment

The research findings reveal that the correlation between integrating and employees' commitment towards organization was positive (r = .43) as the research question stated. Ahmad and Marinah (2013) stated that the integrating style plays a major role in enhancing commitment towards the organization. Somech *et al.* (2009) explains that a cooperative team more often sees an issue as a common problem that needs to be dealt with thus minimizing conflict. Employees that use this style face conflict directly and try to find new and creative solutions to the problems by focusing on their own needs as well as the need of others (Havenga and Visagie, 2011). As Brahnam et al (2005) found out, use of collaborative management strategies generate higher quality decisions, produces superior outcomes with more open exchange of information and a higher level of satisfaction through exploring the conflict issues more comprehensively.

4.5 Compromising style and organizational commitment

The results shows that the correlation was negative (*r* = -.115) as per the research question however,   P-value p= .154> 0.05. The data did not support this statement as the correlation between compromising style and   organizational commitment was not significant. Dobkin and Pace (2006) state that compromising style can boost commitment among employees as it encourages the employees to work together to manage conflict among them. According to Green and Marks (2001), compromising style gives team members a better understanding of others in the team and as a result it enhances commitment among employees towards the organization.

4.6 Dominating style and organizational commitment

The results reveals that there is a positive correlation between dominating style and organizational commitment (r= .196), not negative as the question stated. In the dominating style, employees' response tends to be dependent on the normative acceptance of the position and prerogatives of the organization at large including its leadership. The present result

272

coincided with the conclusion made by Rahim (1986) and Gross & Guerrero (2011) that dominating styles is a less effective means of employees' commitment. It is negatively related with concern for the other party which will usually not improve the relationship among employees.

5.0 Conclusion

The study analyzes the importance of conflict management in organizational commitment, by focusing to conflict management strategies and styles. Practical experiences have shown that managers cannot be left out of conflicts, but must take active part in it. Of the five conflict management styles, only three were found to correlate significantly and thus predict the variation in organizational commitment which are integrating, obliging and compromising styles. KSC employees with higher integrating inclinations have higher value effort commitment and retention commitment while those with higher compromising orientation are of higher value-effort of organizational commitment. As a result, the Seed producing companies are advised to recognize conflict in good time to increase positive competition among members and promote organizational commitment.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings, to maintain and ensure the quality of organizational commitment of the employees, it is recommended that human resources departments should take responsibility to continuously develop employees' interpersonal skills and knowledge in managing conflict. It can be implemented by improving employees understanding on the strength and weaknesses of the five styles of managing conflict and work towards the appropriate use depending on the situation. In addition, employees' perception on conflict should also be improved. Organizations need to have the capacity to help new teams set appropriate norms for themselves and to intervene in established teams that have trouble managing conflict effectively. Emphasize team building and create an environment that emphasizes respect, diversity and equality.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

The following recommendations are made for further research following the findings of this study;

A study needs to be undertaken on the effects of various conflict management strategies applied by various companies on employee organizational commitment. The same study ought to be carried out on a large scale using more than one company and a larger sample. A study needs to be carried out on superior conflict management strategies used by employees in resolving conflicts amongst themselves.

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