

Influence of Interpersonal and Assertiveness Skills on Conflict-Handling Styles of Labour Leaders in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract: The study examined the composite and relative influence of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict-handling style of labour leaders in Lagos State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design of ex-post facto type was adopted for the study. Two hundred and fifty respondents (labour leaders) were purposively selected from ten randomly selected industrial unions in Lagos State. Data were collected through questionnaires and two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha levels, using multiple regression. The findings revealed significant joint effect of interpersonal skill and assertiveness skill on conflict-handling style of labour leaders ($F_{(2,247)} = 15.549, p < 0.05$), which implies that the two skills collectively are potent predictors of conflict-handling styles of labour leaders. Also, the result showed that assertiveness skill is a better predictor of labour leaders' conflict-handling style with a significant relative effect of ($B = 0.286, t = 5.242; p < 0.05$) while interpersonal skill had ($B = 0.096, t = 2.167; p < 0.05$). Based on the findings, it was recommended among other things that training programme on the two skills be organized by government for labour leaders on regular basis; learning materials on the acquisition of the two skills be incorporated into the induction training programme of organizations in the public and private sector; and that employers of labour in the organized private sector should replicate the training programme for top members of management who represent the management during negotiation with labour.

Key words: Assertiveness skill, interpersonal skill, conflict-handling style, labour leaders, industrial conflict, Lagos State

INTRODUCTION

In every human grouping, conflict is bound to ensue. This is largely due to the pursuit of divergent and incompatible interests and goals among different individuals and/or groups that made up the organizations (Omoluabi, 2001; Edwards, 2000; Otite, 2001).

In a typical work organization, for instance, the interest of the employer of labour is fundamentally at variance with that of the workers.

This is so because while the employer who had invested his hard earned money in business is much concerned about maximizing profits at minimum cost, the workers on the other hand are interested in increasing their share of the organization's proceeds through enhanced salaries and better working conditions, which if granted may invariably shoot up the cost of production thereby causing a drastic reduction in the profit margin of the employer.

Yesufu (2000) puts it more succinctly when he said that as the relationship between management and labour becomes more and more sophisticated,

It generates much conflict as the worker tends to demand more wages and/or facilities from his employment to improve his standard of living and welfare, while the employer seeks to extract from him a higher of output to ensure some or rising profitability. The consequences of pursuing high profitability and the demands and counter-demands between the employer and the employee, increasingly generated some conflicts which have important social and economic impact for the country.

Nevertheless, it is germane to mention that conflict is not inherently harmful neither destructive rather its outcome depends largely on how it is handled by the conflicting parties (Hammed, 2002; Bankole and Kester, 2008). In other words, the conflict-handling style of the principal actors in conflict is very critical to the outcome of the conflict management.

In an organization, for instance, where both the management and labour leaders acknowledged the inevitability of conflict and jointly and skillfully handle it

with utmost care and maturity, the consequences may be functional and beneficial not only to the parties but to the organization as a whole (Bankole, 2007). In the same vein, the consequence of a prevalent conflict may be dysfunctional and very devastating in an organization where conflict is considered to be a pathology (Crouch, 1982) that must not be tolerated.

However, it has been observed that in Nigeria particularly in Lagos State, which is the commercial nerve centre of the nation, where companies are most concentrated, the conflict-handling style of labour leaders who incidentally are the representatives of workers during negotiation is grossly defective. The defect in the conflict-handling behaviour of labour leaders has therefore been adduced as the reason for the high incidence of industrial conflict, which had ravaged some industries in Lagos State in particular and Nigeria in general (Hammed and Ayantunji, 2002; Akanji, 2005; Animashaun, 2007; Bankole and Kester, 2008).

Essentially, some of the various past studies have yielded evidences that people develop habitual styles of responding to conflict, which are consistent across situations (Stenberg and Sorano, 1984; Gourlay, 1987). Nevertheless, some recent studies have equally discovered that while people certainly develop habitual styles of responding to conflict, they also have tendency to change or adapt their behaviour from situation to situation depending on the skills they acquired (Hammed, 2002; Ogunyemi, 2004; Animasahun, 2007).

In other words, some essential skills have been discovered to be critical factors in the behaviour of individual workers in organization. The skills are capable of helping individuals to adopt a better and peace sustaining conflict-handling style. The skills include assertiveness skill, interpersonal skill, emotional intelligence, communication skill, self-efficacy skill and a host of others.

Meanwhile, conflict-handling styles are described as behavioural orientations of individuals concerning how conflict should be addressed (Ogunyemi, 2004). Mitchell (2002) identified five conflict handling styles namely:

Competing: This is a style in which an individual expresses high concern for self and low concern for others. It is a power oriented style that typically involves the use of force.

Accommodating: This depicts a situation in which a person has high concern for others and low concern for self. It is a corollary of the above competing style and it involves an element of self-sacrifice reflecting a low self-esteem.

Collaborating: This involves high concern for self and for others. This style is otherwise known as joint problem solving and it is considered as an ideal type of conflict handling style.

Avoiding: This presents a situation in which an individual has low concern for self and for others. It is the opposite of collaborating style. The individual concerned tries to avoid other person or pretend that conflict does not exist even when he is hurt, angry and frustrated.

Compromising: This involves finding an expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both conflicting parties.

The focus of this study however, is not to consider which of the conflict handling styles is the most appropriate in handling industrial conflict instead the researcher is interested in investigating the joint and relative effect of assertiveness skill and interpersonal skill on conflict handling styles of labour leaders in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Assertiveness, which is one of the two skills the study focused on, is a multidimensional construct which embraces several basic personality traits, which are relevant to many aspects of social behaviour hence it has been subjected to diverse definitions. Assertiveness is described as the ability to state positively and constructively one's rights or needs without violating the rights of others. In other words, it is the ability to honestly express one's opinions, feelings, attitude and assert one's rights without undue anxiety and in a way that doesn't infringe on the feelings and rights of others (Elizabeth-Scott, 2007). Thus, an assertive person is expressive and self-enhancing.

An assertive person assumes the best about people, respects their opinions or views and try to compromise on conflicting issues (Hammed, 1999a). Suffice it to say that when a person uses direct, open and honest communication in relationship to meet his personal needs, which is part of what assertiveness is all about, the person feels more confident, gains respect from others and lives a happier and fulfilled life.

Assertiveness is essentially a communication skill in the same way that negotiating, delegating and other identifiable business skills are basically communication skills. It is a skill that enables people to be more confident and develop the right interpersonal skills for handling situation and people.

Thus, people who have mastered the skill of assertiveness are able to greatly reduce the level of interpersonal conflict in their lives (Elizabeth-Scott, 2007).

Perhaps, it is germane to make some clarifications on the differences between aggressiveness and assertiveness because people sometimes use the two concepts interchangeably, seeing that both types of behaviour involve standing up for one's rights and expressing one's needs.

The key difference between the two styles is that an individual with an assertive attitude recognizes that each person has rights and that these rights include right to individuality, to have and express personal preferences, feelings and opinions. Thus, an assertive person assumes the best about people, respect themselves and think win-win as well as try to compromise on issues of divergent interest. It can be inferred therefore that assertive person's behaviours are designed to promote communication and problem solving. This explains why assertive people face problems promptly and focus on solutions rather than the problems.

On the other hand, individuals behaving aggressively will tend to employ tactics that are disrespectful, manipulative, demeaning or abusive. Aggressive individuals, unlike the assertive persons, make negative assumptions about the motives of others and consequently think in retaliatory terms.

An aggressive person doesn't think of other person's point of view at all instead he fights to win at the expense of others and create unnecessary conflict by insisting that his feelings and needs take precedence over that of other people. It is thus obvious that any individual with the type of maladaptive behaviour peculiar to aggressive person may not be able to handle conflict properly and resourcefully. Perhaps, this explains why Hammed (1998) affirmed that the success of any organization depends on highly qualified human resources who must possess some behavioural characteristics such as assertiveness skill, good interpersonal skills, participatory abilities, sense of commitment and dedication as well as loyalty to the organization.

Another generic skill that has been found useful as far as conflict-handling styles of labour leaders are concerned is interpersonal skill. Akinboye (1996) and Hammed (1999b) had shown that for any organization to survive in the face of the intense global competition, it needs people with outstanding interpersonal skills that can be used to stem the tide of interpersonal and inter-group conflicts that had ravaged some industries in Nigeria.

Interpersonal skills have been referred to as mental and communicative algorithms applied during social communications and interactions in order to reach certain effects or results (Wikipedia, 2006). In other words, interpersonal skills are the ability of a person or an

employee to effectively interact with the boss, co-worker or the customer to achieve organizational goals (Hammed, 1999b). The skills include effective communication skills, skills of better listening, skills of assertiveness, clarification and skills of reducing conflict on a daily basis. Thus, it is generally acknowledged that interpersonal skills enable people within the workplace to work with others harmoniously and efficiently and to reduce conflict (Seneca, 2006; Wikipedia, 2006).

Young (2003) in his view described interpersonal skills as the ability to read and manage the emotions, motivations and behaviours of oneself and others during social interactions or in a social-interactive context. In agreement with the views of Young (2003) and Okurame (2000) affirms that interpersonal skills of people influence what they say and how they say it. This, he said, affect their relationship with others. It implies, therefore that the most positive and confident employee may not accomplish much at work without interpersonal and social skills to communicate and function cooperatively with others in a work group.

It goes to show that the team research necessitated by the complexity of today's workplace has placed increased importance on a worker's interpersonal skills. This is so because such teaming often brings together individuals from diverse groups who may not share common norms, values, or vocabularies, yet they will need to research jointly to achieve the cooperate goal of the organization.

In the same vein, negotiation on issues of conflict do bring individuals, that is, labour leaders and management representatives with different norms and values to a round table to sort out their differences. Therefore, to have an effective and constructive negotiation at that point requires that members of each side exercise high degree of interpersonal skills. This explains why Okurame (2000) noted that deficiency in interpersonal skills is the cause of interpersonal and social problems that are militating against the effectiveness and efficiency of an average Nigerian worker. By inference, the absence of interpersonal skills on the part of labour leaders had equally constituted a threat to sustainable industrial peace and harmony in Nigeria.

Based on the study reviewed for the study, the following objectives were generated for the study.

- To examine the joint effect of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict handling styles of labour leaders
- To ascertain the relative effects of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict handling styles of labour leaders

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research questions:

- What are the combined effects of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict handling styles of labour leaders?
- What is the relative contribution of interpersonal and assertiveness skills to conflict handling styles of labour leaders?

Research design: A descriptive survey research design of ex-post facto type was adopted for this study. This is so because the researcher was only interested in investigating the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable without necessarily manipulating the independent variables.

Participants: A total of 250 respondents (labour leaders) were purposively selected from ten randomly selected industrial unions in Lagos State, Nigeria. The choice of Lagos State was informed by the fact that Lagos State is the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria where business organizations are most concentrated and where majority of the industrial unions have their national secretariats. Also, due to high concentration of work organizations in Lagos State, industrial conflicts tend to be more prominent in Lagos State than any other State in Nigeria. Twenty-five labour leaders each were selected from the ten selected industrial unions. The sample contains both males and females with the age ranging from 25-55 years. 205 of the respondents were males while 45 were females.

Instrumentation: Three valid and reliable instruments were used for the study, namely: Assertiveness Skill Scale developed by Hammed (1999c); Interpersonal Skill Scale, developed by Okurame (2000) and Conflict-Handling Style Inventory, developed by Rahim (1983).

The Assertiveness Skill Scale has 14 items with a two-week test retest reliability coefficient of 0.74. The Interpersonal Skill Scale is a 16 items scale with reliability co-efficient of 0.86. Conflict-Handling Style Inventory is a 15 items scale with reliability co-efficient of 0.79. The four point response rating scale of: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree was adopted for the study.

Procedure: The scales were personally administered by the researcher with the help of two experienced research assistants.

Data analysis: The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regressions.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What is the combined effect of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict handling styles of labour leaders?

Results presented in Table 1 shows that the two independent variables (interpersonal and assertiveness skills) when put together yielded a coefficient of multiple Regression (R) of 0.334 and an adjusted R² of 0.105, which implies that the total variance accounted for by the two independent variables in predicting conflict-handling style of labour leaders is 10.5%. Also, the table indicates that the analysis of variance of the multiple regression data produced an F-ratio value significant at 0.05 level ($F_{(2,247)} = 15.549; p < 0.05$), which indicates that the combined effect of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on conflict-handling styles of labour leaders did not occur by chance rather it is a reflection of the effectiveness of the two independent variables in predicting conflict-handling styles of labour leaders.

Research question 2: What is the relative contribution of interpersonal and assertiveness skills to conflict handling styles of labour leaders?

The regression analysis of relative contribution of the two independent variables in Table 2 shows that assertiveness skill made significant separate contribution to the prediction of conflict handling styles of labour leaders ($B = 0.286, t = 5.242; p < 0.05$) followed by interpersonal skill with significant relative effect of ($B = 0.096, t = 2.167; p < 0.05$).

Table 1: Regression analysis of the joint effect of interpersonal and assertiveness skills on the conflict-handling style of labour leaders

Statistical factors	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Remark
Regression	947.4870	2	473.743	15.549	0.000	*
Residual	7526.4130	247	30.467	-	-	-
Total	8472.9000	249	-	-	-	-
R	0.3340	-	-	-	-	-
R ²	0.1120	-	-	-	-	-
Adjusted R ²	0.1050	-	-	-	-	-
SE	5.5197	-	-	-	-	-

Significant at 0.05 level of confidence

Table 2: Relative contribution of the independent variables (interpersonal and assertiveness skills) to the prediction of conflict handling style of labour leaders

Predictor	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		Sig.	Remark
	B	SE	β	T		
Assertiveness skill	0.286	0.055	0.315	5.242	0.000	Sig.
Interpersonal skill	0.096	0.044	0.130	2.167	0.031	Sig.
Constant	28.137	3.050		9.226	0.000	

Significant at 0.05 alpha level

DISCUSSION

The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed that assertiveness skill and interpersonal skill either collectively or separately are potent predictors of conflict handling styles of labour leaders. The magnitude of the relationship between the independent variables in predicting conflict handling styles of labour leaders is reflected in the values of coefficient of multiple regressions (0.334) and in multiple R^2 adjusted (0.105) as shown in Table 1. Thus, it could be said that 10.5% of the total variance in the conflict handling styles of labour leaders is accounted for by the combination of assertiveness skill and interpersonal skill. The F-ratio value of 15.549, which is significant at 0.05 further attests to the fact that the predictive capacity of the independent variables could not be attributed to chance factor.

As regards the extent to which each of the two independent variables contributed to the prediction, it could be deduced from Table 2 that assertiveness skill is a better and stronger predictor of conflict handling styles of labour leaders with ($B = 0.286$, $t = 5.242$; $p < 0.05$) as against interpersonal skill that had relative significant effect of ($B = 0.096$, $t = 2.167$; $p < 0.05$).

The finding of this study found support in the studies of Young (2003), Okurame (2000), Seneca (2006), Wikipedia (2006) and Hammed (1999a) that indicated that assertiveness skill and interpersonal skill are two of the prominent 21st century generic skills which every organization requires to survive in the present global competition. Hammed (1999b) asserts unequivocally that for any organization to survive in the face of complexities facing the world of research, it needs people with distinctive interpersonal skills to stem the tide of interpersonal and inter-group conflicts that are capable of jeopardizing the corporate goals of organization.

The finding of this study also conforms with that of Animashaun (2007) in his study on National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) in which he observed that members and leaders of the union often exhibit certain kinds of maladaptive behaviour such as aggressiveness, poor interpersonal relationship, anti-social behaviour and a host of others which do not make for peaceful co-existence in the society. Animashaun (2007) concluded that such maladaptive behaviours can be checked and corrected only if the members and leaders of the industrial union (NURTW) are trained on certain generic skills such as emotional intelligence, assertiveness skill, interpersonal skill etc.

Similarly, the finding of Okurame (2000) that workers with high levels of interpersonal skills are more likely to have good social character and tendency that put their

minds and that of co-workers at rest, gave credence to the finding of this present study. This is so because it takes a focused and settled mind to negotiate and handle conflictual issues effectively. Ajala (2003)'s study equally supports the findings of this result as it indicated that with good interpersonal skills, workers and management will be aware of and accept each other's feelings as well as adapt to new problems and situations.

However, the edge which assertiveness skill has over interpersonal skill in the prediction of labour leaders' conflict-handling style lies in the fact that it requires an assertive person to build good interpersonal relationship. Without the skill of assertiveness, it may be pretty difficult to acquire interpersonal skill. The former is a ssmeans to the latter. This position is congruent with the findings of Hammed (1999a) and Elizabeth Scott (2007) that assertiveness skills enables people to be more confident and develop the right interpersonal skills for handling people and issues. Elizabeth-Scott (2007) further testified to the fact that people who have mastered the skill of assertiveness are able to greatly reduce the level of interpersonal conflict in their dealing with others.

This goes to show that acting assertively will help people to maintain honesty in relationships allows one to feel more in control of one's world and improves one's ability to make rational decisions which has obvious implication for effective conflict management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, it is shown that the two independent variables (assertiveness skill and interpersonal skill) collectively and separately exert significant effect on labour leaders' conflict-handling styles. Therefore, an intervention training programme on the two skills can be effectively used to enhance the conflict-handling styles of labour leaders. In view of the fact that it takes two to tangle, it may not be out of place to suggest that management representatives who represent management of organizations in negotiation with labour should equally be exposed to training on the two skills.

The likelihood of incorporating the contents of the two skills into the induction training programme of new employees should also be given consideration.

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