

Ebola Response Strategies and Employee Trust: A Survey of Selected Hotels in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between Ebola response strategies and employee trust in selected hotels within Rivers State, Nigeria. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted and data was generated from 144 employees selected using the simple random sampling formula from a population of 242 employees of five selected hotels in Rivers State. The study, being predominantly nomothetic in methodology, empirically ascertains the significant association of two identified empirically referents of the predictor variable, Ebola response strategies, namely; communication and monitoring; with the criterion variable, employee trust using the Spearman's rank order correlation statistical tool. The data collection instrument consisted of the questionnaire with findings revealing that Ebola response strategies such as communication and monitoring significantly correlate with employee trust. Based on these findings, it was concluded that effective and transparent communication and monitoring systems and activities significantly enhance employee trust in organizations and thereafter we recommended that organizations, especially hotels, adopt more transparent and practical approaches which translate or portray confidence and competency on their part especially in given crises situations such as the Ebola. Management should also endeavour to encourage and reassure staff, customers and other stakeholders of their commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of all interested parties during and even after crises events as this would further promote trust and thus enable a more cooperative work environment.

Keywords: Ebola response strategies, employee trust, communication, monitoring, crises

1. Introduction

Organizations everywhere operate within environmental contexts which often times fall under the conditions of various socio-cultural, socio-political, environmental and nature-related incidences. Such contextual instability which seemingly "rocks the organizational boat" could distort and affect employee perceptions of safety, job and personal security as well as perceived management intent. It is therefore important that management through various strategies and support systems endeavour to satiate the "security and safety" needs of employees; this would in turn be reciprocated through desired employee work attitudes, commitment and trust. Any major incidence, external or internal, not properly tackled could leave "holes" in the workings of the organization; holes or leaks which if not checked could further reduce the work environment to a highly tensed, insecure, gossip charged and highly volatile place. It is hence an imperative that management seek out strategies which are pre-emptive enough as relates to impending crisis situations as well as sensitive enough towards stakeholders, especially employees within the workplace (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Rawlings, 2009; Jahansoozi 2006).

A crisis is defined as any threatening event, whether impending or in occurrence, which affects business operations, staff and processes in a disruptive manner requiring a change or adjustment in business protocols, systems, policies and processes necessitated by the need to survive (Rawlings, 2009; Jahansoozi 2006). It is any event which, if not well handled, could destabilize the organization, break down employee morale, spread fear and hysteria, and if not tackled properly could further lead to a decline in trust; thus the manner and way a crisis is managed is very important. According to Jahansoozi (2006), the approach taken in confronting a crisis situation is very vital as it either rebuilds the trustworthiness of the organization or throws its activities into the "suspicious zone" in which employees and other stakeholders continue to doubt the authenticity and reasons behind management actions. Studies show that methods or strategies adopted by organizations either during a crisis or after the crisis plays a serious role in either sustaining the organization during the crisis situation or in its effective recovery from such a situation (Rawlings, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

In evaluating crisis situations; response strategies to such situations and employee trust in the affected organizations; this paper draws its relevance and significance from its empirical investigation of the Ebola response strategies adopted by hotels in Nigeria and its association with the employee trust in those hotels. Given the Ebola epidemic which, at a certain point in time (between July 2014 – September, 2014), posed as a major contextual crisis for various businesses especially the hospitality industry in Nigeria, this research as a point of departure from previous studies draws upon the relevance and effectiveness of the response Strategies adopted especially by the hotel management of the hotels in the Ebola affected areas (Rivers State) in handling the crisis

and how such strategies have affected the trust levels of their employees in terms of personal safety and job security. The objectives of the study are specified as follows:

- i. To ascertain the association between communication and employee trust
- ii. To determine the relationship between monitoring and employee trust

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ebola Response Strategies

Strategic management can be described as the fit between the internal capabilities of a given organization and the attractive opportunities and significant threats in its external environment (Harrison, 1986). According to Katz (1970), as a concept, there are two main attributes of strategic management. The first is described as the strategic posture which refers to the relationship between a particular organization and its external environment at a specific point in time. Secondly, the strategic plan which refers to the procedures, methods and steps adopted by the organization in achieving its goals or objectives. This follows the argument of (Harrison, 1986) in which he opines that the major purpose of strategy is for coping with uncertainties, most of which stem from the external environment.

The scourge of the Ebola virus which spread across parts of West Africa, gravely affecting countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Senegal and Nigeria; dragged along with it various implications for the economies of the affected countries (WHO, 2014). Schools were reportedly shut down, markets deserted, and most organizational activities halted in efforts to contain and curb the menace. In spite of these, several organizations yet continued with their operations and services, such of whose activities the populace relied a great deal on; for example, hotels, banks, hospitals and various security agencies. It is important to note, that while the government, through various activities tried to curb the spread of the virus; considerable efforts were at the same time, initiated by various organizations, especially hotels, in controlling for the negative effect of the disease in relation to their customers and staff. Interesting enough is the fact that, most of the strategies adopted by the hotel management at the micro-level actually mirrored that of the state and federal government at the macro-level.

Activities such as awareness campaigns, isolation centres, airport checks and stringent immigration protocols, were mirrored by hotel management in communication, checks before entry into hotel premises, and other human supervisory and regulatory functions. This is as Heath (1998) observed that the effective capacity of organizations to respond to a crisis involves:

- i. The acquisition of required resources comprising of knowledge, technology, finance and skill to deal with the crisis
- ii. The development of plans aimed at resolving the crisis situation
- iii. The provision of training to enable the effective use of resources and appropriate response actions in crisis situations
- iv. The effective translation of response strategies into tactical action in crisis situation

Studies show that one effective approach used in the handling crisis such as the Ebola which posed a threat to the organization, is the establishment of a crisis response team which whether ad hoc (Meyers & Holusha, 1986) or permanent (Barton, 1993) should consist of trained professionals vested with conventional authority to carry out or enforce strategic crisis management activities as prescribed and authorized (Heath, 1998).

For the purpose of empirical procedures, this study draws upon two main empirical referents of the Ebola response Strategies as adopted by the hotels in Rivers State, namely; communication and monitoring; two seemingly miniature versions of the government's awareness campaigns, Ebola isolation centres and immigration check activities.

2.2 Employee Trust

Trust is described as the belief and reliance invested in another individual, party or agent to be considerably unselfish, to be responsive in certain ways and to meet with certain expectations (Yilmaz & Kabadayi, 2000). It encompasses not only expectations based on outcomes but also comprises of a reliance on the ability or competence of the trustee to actually deliver the desired results and in the required quality and format. Employee trust within this context is used to describe the belief, reliance and expectations of employees within an organization held towards the recognized high-ranking, authoritative and decision-making representatives of same organization especially as pertains to the employees' welfare, working conditions, security and safety (Sonnenwald, 2005; Blomqvist, Hurmelinna & Seppanen, 2003).

According to (Mosevi, Abedi & Ghaedi, 2013) Employee trust relates to perceptions of fair treatment, management support as a result of observed policies, practices and culture, workplace recognition and reward, ethics as well as job security. Trust is that factor that draws the employee in emotionally and keeps him or her there. A good predictor of trust at the workplace is the employees' perception about the trustworthiness of

management based on competency and credibility; heretrust is deposited in the character and dependability of leadership as a result of past experiences, observed knowledge or skill especially as expressed in hazardous situations; hazardous here encompasses events which act as negative effects and destabilizers to business operations, events such as, riots, armed robbery incidences, internal political rifts, external political tensions and disease out breaks such as the Ebola.

According to Waal and Nhemachena (2006), employees' haven invested their trust in management, see themselves as part of the organization and therefore commit themselves to the goals and objectives of the organization hence in the face of challenges, maintaining this trust becomes a priority for management. This, the author further argues, can be achieved through the application of management techniques which allow for coaching of employees through periods of challenges. It is important that employees understand that change is inevitable and necessary, yet more important that they see the seriousness and sincere efforts of management in sorting out the organization during and after such change experiences.

2.3 Ebola Response Strategies and Employee Trust

Coombs (2007) opines that crisis response strategies translates as an organizations answer to a crisis situation, expressed through management's actions during and after the crisis and describes the level of responsibility initiated by management with respect to the situation. Such actions affect the perceptions of employees which, according to the author, can be referred to as framing. Framing describes the identification and methods adopted in the treatment of perceived threats or threat incidences as well as the management of the perceptions of stakeholders regarding such incidences. The objective of framing is control; control of the factors associated with the change incidence, control of stakeholder perceptions as well as control of organizational reputation during and after such incidences. Activities such as communication and monitoring have been shown to facilitate desirable outcomes with respect to the Ebola crisis as specified by this study; hence they could serve as effective framing tools and strategic approaches in curbing threat associated fears, distrust and perceptions of insecurity during and after crisis or threat incidences (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

2.3.1 Communication and Employee Trust

Communication as applied herein refers to the transfer and reception of timely information regarding activities or intended activities in a manner and format well understood, consistent, documentable and retrievable within the organization. it describes the degree of interpersonal relations within the organization drawing upon the structure and hierarchy of work, the flow of information as well as the access to documented information or data within the organization about events, activities or work related variables; these are expected to be achieved using methods well understood by members and using consistent means not easily adulterated or misconstrued (Simonsson, 2002; Johansson, 2003.).

Guo (2003) observed that managers as strategists could effectively communicate through the formulation and implementation of public policies which are clear, concise and consistent with the organizations overall goal or plan; such policies should be consistent with the objectives of the organization as concerns the treatment, harnessing or control for identified or possible environmental threats and opportunities. In accordance with this, Athey & Moody-Williams (2003) emphasized on the importance of the timely dissemination of communication following a crisis. The authors opined that communication procedures should take into consideration the possibility of language barriers such as primary language differences of affected staff or employees; therefore oral and written information should be made available in languages other than English. A well-managed communication system would portray organizational effectiveness and preparedness against expected or experienced threats. Therefore based on the foregoing we therefore hypothesize that:

H₁: There is a significant and positive relationship between communication and employee trust

2.3.2 Monitoring and Employee trust

Monitoring within the context of this study can be described as the supervision, recording, storage and evaluation of the activities of members and other interested parties (employees and customers) of the organizations using various technological means aimed at identifying, controlling and coping with possible potential threats to the organization (Bezek& Britton, 2001; Bhatt, 2001). It includes activities such as workplace behavioural observations, information control and processing, email tracking, and workplace entrance checks with the intent of creating an environment of accountability, transparency and trust in which stakeholders feel save and reassured of the competency of management in dealing with any threat experienced or predicted (Yerby, 2013).

Studies indicate growing levels of concern over organizational monitoring activities which as argued, is a deliberate invasion of employee privacy, can be stressful to customers, and can cause discontent amongst both employees and customers (Watson, 2001; Yerby, 2013) but as Frayer (2002) opines, monitoring is a necessity since it allows for the control of several undesirable events such as employee revelation of trade secrets, sexual harassment, piracy or in this case the spread of a deadly disease within the organization. Such display of control and supervision could pose comforting for organizational stakeholders especially since it would present

the organization in the light of being in charge and on top of the situation. We therefore hypothesize that:
H₂: There is a significant and positive relationship between monitoring and employee trust

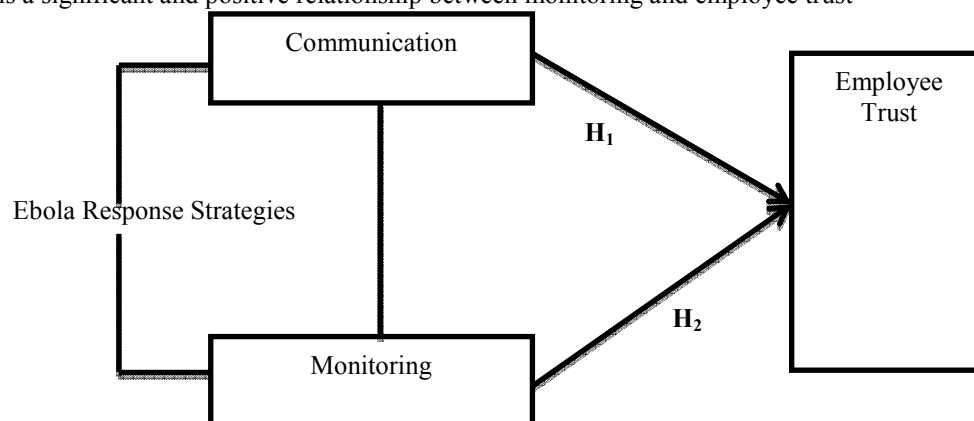


Figure. 1. Operational Framework and Model for the Study

3. Methodology

The study adopts a dominant nomothetic approach, hence a quantitative methodology in the analysis of the relationship between Ebola response strategies and employee trust (Ahiauzu, 2006). As a quasi-experimental study, the cross sectional survey study method is used in the generation of data from a sample of a hundred and forty four (144) employees drawn from an accessible population of 242 employees of five (5) selected hotels operating and geographically situated in Rivers State, one of the areas affected by the Ebola virus in Nigeria. The Krejcie and Morgan, 1970 sampling table was used in sample size derivation and sampling was done using the simple random sampling technique with analysis at the individual level (Sekaran, 2003; Bryman & Bell, 2003).

The questionnaire is designed to cover two sections, section A is used to capture the demographic nature and characteristic of the sample, section B is used to capture respondent opinions about the variables in their organizations. The Ebola response Strategies (predictor variable) is operationalized using two empirical referents namely: communication and monitoring. Both variables are measured on a 7 – item instrument and scaled using the 5 – point Likert scale ranked from a non-affirmative variable presence or indicator of strongly disagree (1) to an affirmative variable presence or practice of strongly agree (5). Employee trust (Criterion variable) is measured on a 7 – item instrument indicating trust levels expressed within the organization with levels of affirmations on each indicator ranked from a non-affirmative presence of strongly disagree (1) to a strongly agree (5) (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Schoorman & Ballinger, 2006; Sekaran, 2003).

Reliability of the instruments are estimated using the Cronbach alpha reliability scale which has been observed to be suitable for multi-point scaled items with indications of better measurements through higher coefficients (Sekaran 2003). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the instruments are thus presented below:

Communication:

Alpha coefficient = .911; Number of indicators = 7

Monitoring:

Alpha coefficient = .943; Number of indicators = 7

Employee Trust:

Alpha coefficient = .889; Number of indicators = 7

4. Findings of the Study

Analysis was carried out using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS v.17), data is presented as analysed in three main stages, the demographic; in which the characteristics of the sample is described using frequencies and percentages, the univariate in which the response tendencies for each variable is illustrated and described through the use of mean scores and standard deviations, and finally the bivariate in which the hypotheses are tested.

4.1 Demographic Analysis

Table 1. Demographic analysis

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	94	65
	Female	50	35
Marital Status	Single	35	24
	Married	106	74
	Separated	3	2
Tenure with organization	Less than 5 years	11	8
	6 – 10 years	73	51
	11 – 15 years	37	26
	16 – 20 years	18	12
	21 years and above	5	3
Level in the organization	Upper management	2	1
	Middle management	14	10
	Supervisory level	43	30
	Junior level	85	59

Source: Research output, 2015

Presented above in the table (1) is the output for the demographic analysis of the study with categories for each characteristic. As illustrated the gender characteristic of the distribution carries an unequal distribution between the male (65%) and the female (35%). Possibly an outcome of the nature of the industry (hospitality) which can be highly stressful and requires a lot of time, an obvious impediment especially for married women or mothers who may have difficulty coping with work and family.

As revealed, most of the respondents are married (74%), a good sign of perceived job security, this is followed by the single category (24%) possibly indicating a moderate level of reliance on independence, youthful vigour and enthusiasm, considering the nature of the job with emphasis on marketing and innovative customer service, finally, the separated category (2%) which comprises of the widowed and the divorced.

Tenure with organization is an indication of employees' commitment and loyalty, both variables are "offshoots" of trust in the organization. the highest category is the 6 – 10 years (51%), a moderate sign considering the position or level of the majority of staff, this is followed by the 11 – 15 years (26%), yet still an indication of sustained commitment and reliance, then the 16 – 20 years (12%) closely followed by the less than 5 years (8%) and finally the 21 years and above category (3%).

Level in the organization is used to identify the categories and staff levels captured by the study, the point here is representation as pertains to the variables of the study. The junior level staff, comprising of the bartenders, cashiers, bar maids, security personnel etc. carries the highest percentage (59%), followed by the supervisory level (30%), the next category is the middle management, comprising of departmental managers and heads of hotel service operation (10%) while the upper management category carries the lowest percentage (1%).

4.2 Univariate Analysis

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on the empirical referents of Ebola response strategies

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication	144	1.14	4.86	3.9018	.87273
Monitoring	144	1.00	5.00	3.7470	1.06754
Valid N (listwise)	144				

Source: Research output, 2015

Presented in table 2 is the output for the analysis on the empirical referents of the predictor variable which is the Ebola response strategies as adopted by the target hotel managements. Communication which reflects the flow of timely and valid information within the organization concerning the spread of the virus carries a mean score (x) of 3.9018; while monitoring, which reflects the supervisory activities and security checks of both customers and employees within the hotel premises carries a mean score (x) of 3.7470. Based on the nature of the Likert scale adopted (5 –point Likert) and the low values of the associated standard deviations ($S < 2.0$), It is the opinion of this study that there is a satisfactory level of the practice or presence of the variables within the target organizations

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the variables of the study

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Strategies	144	1.07	4.86	3.8244	.88475
Trust	144	1.14	4.86	3.8909	.86954
Valid N (listwise)	144				

Source: Research output, 2015

Presented in table 3 is the output for the statistics on the study variables; the predictor variable which is Ebola response strategies carries a mean score (\bar{x}) of 3.8244 while the criterion variable which is employee trust carries a mean score (\bar{x}) of 3.8909. Associated standard deviations are considered low ($S < 2.0$) based on the consistency and nature of the scale adopted (5 – point Likert scale). The results imply satisfactory affirmative opinions as relates to the presence of each variable.

4.3 Bivariate Analysis

In this section, analysis is carried out on the hypothesized relationships. Analysis herein is directional as it examines the positive relationship between the empirical referents of the Ebola response strategies adopted by hotels in the affected areas. The two referents adopted are communication and monitoring; both are herein tested and their positive association with employee trust is illustrated in table 3. The spearman's rank order correlation is used in the test for the hypotheses and being a one tailed test, a significance level of $p > 0.025$ or $p < 0.025$ is used as criteria for the rejection of acceptance of the hypothetical statements. The rho values are herein used as statistical implications of the extent of positive associations between variables.

Table 4. Hypotheses testing

			Trust	Communication	Monitoring
Spearman's rho	Trust	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.701**	.420**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	144	144	144
	Communication	Correlation Coefficient	.701**	1.000	.626**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	144	144	144
	Monitoring	Correlation Coefficient	.420**	.626**	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	144	144	144

Source: Research output, 2015

Presented in table 3 is the output for the bivariate analysis and hypotheses testing of the study; as presented; the figures show strong and positive association in both instances, where (**) indicates that correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed) and (*) indicates that correlation is significant at the 0.025 level (1-tailed).

Hypothesis one (H_1 : There is a significant and positive relationship between communication and employee trust) carries a high rho value of 701, indicating a very high and strong positive association between both variables with a $p < 0.025$ value; therefore based on this finding, we therefore accept the hypothesis that communication is statistically significant and positively associated with employee trust.

Hypothesis two (H_2 : There is a significant and positive relationship between monitoring and employee trust) carries a moderate rho value of 420, indicating a moderate yet significant positive association between both variables with a $p < 0.025$ value; therefore based on this finding, we therefore accept the hypothesis that monitoring is statistically significant and positively associated with employee trust.

Therefore as a result of the findings from the study, both hypotheses are accepted, implying significant and positive associations between the Ebola response strategies and the employee trust as expressed within the target organizations. Figure 1 below further illustrates the association between the Ebola response Strategies and Employee trust.

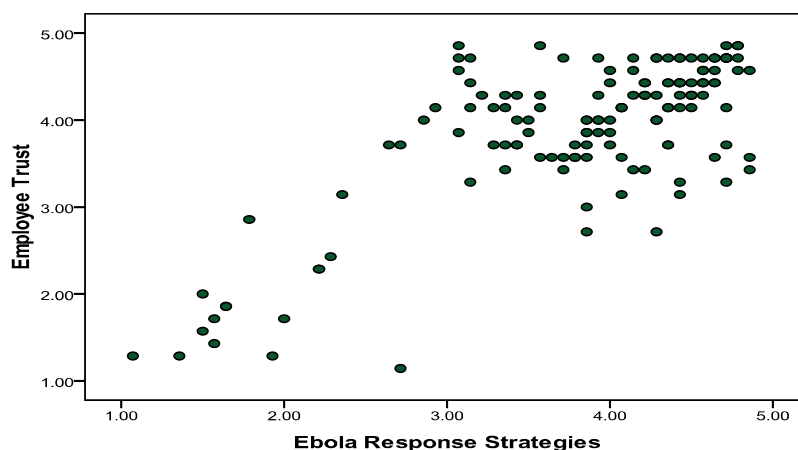


Figure. 2. Ebola Response Strategies and Employee Trust

5. Discussion of Findings

This study using empirical methods, investigated the association between the Ebola response strategies and employee trust of selected hotels in Rivers State. The findings of the analysis support the previously hypothesized statements of significant and positive associations between the identified empirical referents of the Ebola response strategies (communication and monitoring) and employee trust; thus the implications of the findings are discussed as follows:

5.1 Communication and Employee Trust

As indicated by the findings, effective communication systems within the organization, creates a more secured, relaxed and harmonious work environment; thus enhancing employee trust (Guo,2003). Crisis situations such as the Ebola require prompt and decisive measures, achievable only through effective communication networks which must be timely, valid and consistent with the situation on ground (Athey & Moody-Williams, 2003). The presence of such observable communication protocol; an obvious sign of managerial crisis transparency; not only enables a more effective approach towards resolving the situation but also presents management in the light of "undertaking "genuine efforts" in curbing the crisis and in the safe guard of the interest of interested parties; thus promoting trust and employee reliance on the organization.

5.2 Monitoring and Employee Trust

The findings also indicate that monitoring activities (supervision of staff, cameras in strategic locations, the use technological devices such as the thermometer hand gun, steel detectors, body scanners and other such devices at the hotel) which relate to the supervision and control of activities, behaviour and resources during a time of crisis such as the Ebola, affects employee trust. Through such activities, management is able to demonstrate its commitment to protecting and securing the well-being of the organization's stakeholders (Yerby, 2013). Such activities go to show, that not only is management on top of the situation, but that it is also ready, competent and serious as regards the threat at hand; thus endearing employee trust, and even enhancing employee identification.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the use or adoption of effective communication systems and monitoring activities as Ebola response strategies have been shown to significantly enhance employee trust within hotels; this illustrates employee needs for managerial demonstrations of knowledge, competency and transparency during crisis situations such as the Ebola outbreak as these would satiate uncertainties and fears about job loss, health risk and other security issues. We therefore recommend as follows

- i. More practical, transparent and visible steps should be adopted in handling crisis and other related threat incidences especially when expectations about the outcomes of such events hold sway among the staff and other stakeholders
- ii. Management should endeavour to inform when due, stakeholders of the organization about foreseen events which may pose as threats to the organization, reassuring them through activities and processes which are to be or have been implemented against such undesirable events.

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