

The Influence of Supervisors' Conflict Management Style on Employees Counterproductive Work Behaviours

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Abstract

The study sought to find the relationship between supervisors' conflict management style and employees work attitude specifically counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). The study proposed that supervisors integrating, dominating and obliging conflict management styles will be negatively related to counterproductive work behaviour while avoiding and compromising will be positively related CWB. A sample of 115 subordinates from financial organizations, a telecommunication organization, manufacturing firms and a computer software company were selected for the study. The results revealed that dominating, obliging and compromising styles of managing conflict was positively related to CWB while integrating and avoiding styles were negatively related to CWB. Measures of conflict management styles used by supervisors and counterproductive work behaviour were administered to students. The study employed Pearson Correlation Coefficient to analyze that data. The findings are discussed below.

Keywords: Conflict management styles, Counterproductive work behaviors (CWB)

Introduction

McShane and VonGlinow (2003) defined conflict management as interventions that alter the level and form of conflict in ways that maximize its dysfunctional consequences. Conflict management is an intentional attempt by supervisors to enter into employees grievances or dispute in order to alter or influence the situation to minimize its undesirable outcomes. In the event of conflict emotions and tempers rise and inability of a supervisor to employ the most appropriate style to resolve such risen emotions and tempers would affect subordinates work attitudes.

A work attitude is a broad term; however this study concentrates on counterproductive work behaviours. Counterproductive work behaviours seem to be a growing concern for most organizations all over the world due to the threat it poses to the progress of the organization. As the name suggest, counterproductive work behaviours are various negative acts and actions usually indulge in by employees to retard the growth of the organization. These are behaviours which are intentionally put up by workers as a form of retaliation to certain injustices and unfairness at work. When employees usually feel that their emotions had been led down, they usually take to certain negative behaviours with the intention of punishing the organization for the injustices meted out to them. These injustices and unfairness usually arise from the way supervisors manage conflict at work, thus conflict management style adopted by leaders clearly affects the extent to which employees indulge in this negative behaviours which in turn hinder the progress of the organization.

According to Mount, Ilies and Johnson (2006) CWB's represent a class of behaviours that are discretionary. These are behaviours individuals make conscious choices to indulge in, such as playing mean pranks, swearing at coworkers, falsifying expenses reports, and sabotaging the work of others, cited in Zirghan and Umair (2009). In addition to the points mentioned above lateness to work, taking long breaks, theft, disruptions, putting in minimal effort at work and refusal to abide by rules of the organization are other CWB's which hinders the progress of the organization. For instance, an employee who has access to organization's vital information might decide to sell to the organization's competitors just to punish the organization. Research has proven that withdrawing (avoiding) strategy adopted by supervisors in the event of conflict has tendency of breeding counterproductive behaviours (Alper, Law & Tjosvold, 2000; Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey 2004; Ogungbmla, 2006; Omuoluabi, 2001). This implies that when supervisors employ unconcern tactics in resolving conflict, employees are likely to resort to counterproductive work behaviours.

Moreover, other authors have indicated that workers who felt they were not given fair hearing in the resolution of conflict may develop negative attitude to work or their organization such as low organization citizenship behaviour (Moorman, 1991; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000). By extension, when supervisors failed to take appropriate steps to resolve conflict, employees would withhold organization citizenship behaviour and rather resort to counterproductive work behaviours.

Rahim and Bonoma (1979) have conceptualized these styles of conflict into two dimensions. These are concern for self and concern for others based on Blake and Mouton's (1964) model of managerial styles. Based on the above categorization, five different conflict handling styles below were derived. **Dominating style** of handling conflict basically occurs when one party decides to employ tactics to achieve his/her objective without

considering its consequences on the other party. This style has high concern for self and low concern for others. **Integrating** style is usually used when parties to conflict normally decide to find solutions which would be acceptable to both parties, to do away with the pending conflict and tension between them. Avoiding style is where parties to conflict sometimes pretend as if there is no conflict, stay away or withdraw from the substance of the conflict. Compromising style is associated with concern for self and others. Here parties deliberately come to consensus to forego something which is very important to both parties for agreement to be reached. Obliging style is where a party to the conflict decides to satisfy the interest of the party at his own expense. Thomas and Schmidt (1976) pointed out that conflict management is a basic dimension of team effectiveness. They further added that due to the vital nature of conflict; managers spend at least 20 percent of their working time managing conflicts. This clearly shows that, supervisors cannot do without conflict and that conflict management is part of managerial duties which every leader must learn to handle to ensure sound and peaceful working environment. There are different styles of handling conflict. However the ability to adopt the appropriate style depends on the emotional experience of the leader in charge. Thus the emotional experience of the leader usually plays a major role in adopting the appropriate style that may suit the conflict at hand.

Literature Review

Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis - Dollard & Miller (1939)

Frustration is defined as the blocking of ongoing goal directed behavior leading to arousal of a drive whose primary goal is to harm. This aggressive drive leads to aggressive behavior. Frustration leads to aggression. The theory added that emotional arousal plays a pertinent role in the frequency and intensity of conflict.

It could be deduced from theory that, conflict usually crops up when employees felt that coworkers are deliberately frustrating their activities within the organization. By extension, when supervisors fail to handle conflict between coworkers in a free and fair manner or fail to adopt appropriate conflict management style, frustrated employees may resort to aggressive and violent act toward coworkers just to register their displeasures against their supervisors. This in turn impacts negatively on subordinates work attitudes of which counterproductive work behaviour is no exception

Shermerhon, Hunt and Osborn (2000) concluded in their study that, conflicts lead to decrease work productivity and job satisfaction and contribute to absenteeism and job turnover. The authors above made a possible link between conflicts, absenteeism and work productivity which are factors of counterproductive work behaviours. For instance, workers who are not happy with the way conflict is managed within the organization may decide to stay away from work very much with number of baseless reasons or may engage in certain behaviours that may affect employees work productivity.

Spector and Fox (2002) have also indicated that counterproductive work behaviours have links with negative emotions such as anger, frustration and anxiety in response to work related events. Conflict rests on emotions and when emotions rise and when supervisors fail to manage conflict in a free and fair manner workers may vent their anger and emotions on the organization by engaging in certain negative behaviours just to register their displeasure. Other researchers have also added that conflict resolution strategies have links with work performance or work indicators (Alper, Law & Tjosvold, 2000; Meyer, 2004).

According to Adebayo (2006) The more the employees perceived organizational injustice and unfairness as arising from their management's use of uncooperative and negative conflict resolution strategies in the work place, the more they reciprocated by exhibiting more negative attitudes to work and the organization such as reduced organizational commitment, trust, loyalty and withholding OCB (cited in Salami, 2009). Adebayo (2006) makes it explicit that inability to use or choose appropriate conflict management style may influence employees to engage in negative behaviours such as absenteeism, closing early and reporting, divulging company vital information to competitors, stealing companies properties, over charging bills, gossiping, which are forms of counterproductive work behaviours which hinder the growth of the organization.

This finding is again supported by Moorman, 1991; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000. These researchers argue that employees who were not given fair hearing in the resolution of a conflict may develop negative attitude to work or their organization such as low organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB).

Similarly, other researchers have linked conflict to being a target of bullying through "productive" (i.e. "problem-solving") and "destructive" (i.e. "yielding", "avoiding" or "fighting") conflict management styles (Aquino, 2000; Ayoko, Callan and Härtel, 2003; Baillien & De Witte, 2009) cite in Baillien, Bollen and De Witte. Ogunbamila (2006) found that the forcing strategy had a direct significant relationship with work frustration while confronting, withdrawing, smoothing and compromising strategies did not. The results indicate that supervisors who resort to the use of forcing their opinion or decisions on subordinates during conflict between superior-subordinate or subordinate-subordinate may lead to frustration of the employees and this may lead to employees engaging in negative behaviours just to punish the organization.

According to Montoro-Rodriguez and Small (2006) nurses' job satisfaction, psychological morale and occupational stress were influenced by conflict resolution strategies. Salami (2009) did a very classic study and the results showed that forcing and withdrawing strategies negatively and significantly predicted OCB while

confronting, compromising and smoothing strategies significantly predicted OCB.

Statement of Hypotheses

1. There will be negative relationship between supervisors integrating conflict management style and subordinates CWB
2. Avoiding Conflict management style of a supervisor will be positive related to subordinates CWB
3. There will be positive relationship between supervisors compromising style of management and subordinates CWB
4. Dominating style of managing conflict will be negatively related to subordinates CWB
5. There will be negative relationship between supervisors obliging style of managing conflict and subordinates CWB.

Methodology

This study drew participants from both private and public organizations, different units and department from such organizations, as well as employees with different ages, experience, and sex. In view of this, the most appropriate design adopted for this study was cross-sectional Survey design. This design was employed because different views were sampled from different organization at a particular point in time

The population for this study was selected from both private and public Organizations specifically from financial institutions, computer Software Company, telecommunication and manufacturing organizations within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. These organizations are in the formal sector of the economy which basically means their activities follow accepted or established norms. Thus, in formal organizations there are supervisors or leaders within every section of the organization who directly handles employees grievances compared to the informal sector, which does not have any established norm in handling employee’s differences.

Convenient sampling was employed in selecting the organizations which participated in this study while purposive sampling was employed in selecting the respondents. Thus, investigator expects that every participant in this study must at least have a supervisor or work under a supervisor hence the choice of purposive sampling. Overall 150 respondents were purposively sampled from the organizations outlined above. However, only 115 were actually used for the statistical analysis which pegs the response rate to 76.66%. Stevens (1996) had pointed out that for a reliable equation to be obtained in social science research, about 15respondents per a predictor were needed. This requirement was met in this study.

Supervisors’ conflict management style was measured with Form C of ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983a). This questionnaire was designed by Rahim to ascertain the perception of subordinates in relation to their superior’s conflict handling style. This questionnaire was divided into five different dimensions with a total of 28 items on a five point Likert Scale, strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, moderately agree=3, agree=4, strongly agree=5. The various dimensions are dominating style with 5 items, avoiding style with 6 items, integrating style with 7items, obliging style with 6items and compromising style with 4items. The alpha values for the various dimensions are dominating .90, avoiding .78, integrating .95, obliging .85 and compromising .78.In this study, the reliabilities obtained are dominating.65, avoiding.67, integrating .89, obliging.82, and compromising.71

The counterproductive work behaviours were measured with instrument designed by Fox et al (2001). The Instrument consists of 8 items with alpha value of .84. This questionnaires was used to assess employees involvement in activities that retards the growth of the organization or dysfunctional to organization.CWB was measured on five-point response format ranging from Never=1, Once or Twice a day=2, Once or Twice per Month=3, Once or Twice per Week=4, Everyday=5. The possible range of scores ranges from 8-40. Example of an item is “Took supplies home without permission”, “left work earlier than allowed”. Reliability for the present study is .70

Results

This chapter presents the analysis of the proposed relationship between the dimensions of supervisors; conflict management style and subordinates counterproductive work behaviours. The SPSS version 16 was used to analyze the data. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was employed in establishing the possible relationship between the conflict management styles and the counterproductive work behaviours. The results obtained are depicted in the table below.

Summary of Pearson correlations among employees (subordinates) Demographic, independent and dependent variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Dominating	-					
2. Avoiding	.189*	-				
3. Integrating	-.204*	-.072	-			
4. Obliging	-.019	.166	.523*	-		
5. Compromising	-.142	-.102	.386**	.201*	-	
6. CWB	.286**	-.088	-.048	.100	.130	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) * .05 Correlation is significant at 2-tailed

The Hypothesis one proposed a negative relationship between integrating conflict management style and CWB. However, the results obtained indicated that there was a negative relationship between supervisors' conflict management style and CWB ($r = -.048, P > .05$). Even though the relationship was not significant it basically point out that more supervisors use integrating style in managing conflict the less likely employees would engage in CWB. This obviously suggests that supervisor' should in times of managing conflict between supervisors-subordinate or coworkers should give opportunity to the people involved in the conflict to freely express their opinion. This would help employees to feel accept any decision made by the supervisor because employees would feel he was giving a listening ear and this measure may help bring boiling emotions down. However, if supervisors felt that they have the final say and therefore neglect the reasons that led to the conflict and rather use his/her veto powers to make a decision, it certain that one of the people involved in the conflict may not be happy. Unhappy employee may resort CWB to get even with the supervisor or the organization. This hypothesis was therefore supported.

The second hypothesis also stated that there will be positive relationship between supervisors avoiding style of managing conflict and CWB. However, the results obtained indicates that avoiding style of managing conflict was negatively related to CWB ($r = -.088, P > .05$). The results basically, indicate that the more employees use avoiding style the less likely employees would engage in CWB. This certainly is an interesting finding. Again, even though the relationship was not significant the results suggest that the more supervisors neglect conflict or pretend to see not conflict between coworkers and allow the conflict to die out itself employees are less likely to engage in CWB. In other words, workers prefer their supervisor stay away from conflict or misunderstanding between coworkers. However, if supervisors refuse stay away and rather decide to step to any time there is conflict employees would engage in counterproductive work behaviours.

The third hypothesis also stated that compromising style of managing conflict will be positively related to CWB. This hypothesis was not supported by the study ($r = .100, P > .130$). The result basically suggest that the more supervisor resort to the use of compromise in solving conflict the more employees would engage in CWB or the less supervisors employ compromising in resolving conflict the less likely employees would engage in CWB. This again is an interesting finding. This means that supervisors should always ask employees to forego something very vital or delicate just for peace to reign because the more supervisors the more employees would be angry and possibly feel that they have been treated unjustly and would pay back the organization by engaging negative behaviours just register their displeasure.

The fourth hypothesis stated that there will be negative relationship between dominating style of managing conflict and CWB. However, the results obtained indicated that there was significant positive relationship between dominating style of managing conflict and CWB ($r = .286, P < .05$). This basically suggests that the more employees use dominating style in managing conflict the more employees would resort to CWB. In other words if supervisors use their powers within the organization to force decisions based on conflict in the throat of conflicting parties the outcome would be employees engaging in negative behaviours just retard the growth of the organization. In other words, supervisors are supposed to welcome views of both parties and delve deep into the substance of the conflict to integrate their views into the decision that would be arrive at by the leader. Ideally, supervisors should avoid the use of dominating since it use can lead to CWB's.

The final hypothesis stated that obliging style of managing conflict will be negatively related to CWB. However, the results obtained indicated that obliging style of managing conflict was positively related to CWB. This indicate that if supervisors always employ this style of managing conflict employees would engage in CWB and if he uses less frequently they are less likely to engage in CWB. In other words, the more supervisors ask some employees who are seen as less important to the organization to give in to the person who is seen to be important to the organization the outcome would be CWB. For instance, if misunderstanding arose between the front desk employee or receptionist and another employee in accounts department and the receptionist is rather ask to apologize to accounts officer because they think he is more important to the organization. The receptionist can also resort to CWB by keeping vital information from recipient, divulging key information to competitors just to punish the organization for the injustice used in resolving conflict.

Discussion of Findings

The findings obtained shows that integrating style was negatively related to CWB. This finding was supported Salami (2009) who concluded that forcing and withdrawing strategies negatively and significantly predicted OCB while Confronting, compromising and smoothing strategies significantly predicted OCB. Thus, by deduction when employees stay away from counterproductive work behaviours they are likely to engage in OCB hence the more you use integrating the less likely employees would in CWB. In a similar study, Salami's concluded that Smoothing strategy positively predicted OCB which means that the more supervisors use integrating style in managing conflict the more employees would engage in OCB which means they are less likely to engage in CWB.

The second finding reveals a negative relationship between supervisors' avoiding conflict management style and Counterproductive work behaviours. This finding was contracted by a similar study by Adebayo

(2006) who concluded that the more the employees perceived organizational injustice and unfairness as arising from their management's use of uncooperative and negative conflict resolution strategies in the work place, the more they reciprocated by exhibiting more negative attitudes to work and the organization such as reduced organizational commitment, trust, loyalty and withholding OCB (cited in Salami, 2009). However, the findings obtained in this study clearly indicate that if supervisors' use avoiding style which basically is a form of ignoring the substance of the conflict employees would rather minimize their engagement in CWB.

The study again found that there was positive relationship between supervisors' compromising style and CWB. This finding was supported by researchers who have indicated that conflict resolution strategies have links with work performance or work indicators (Alper, Law & Tjosvold, 2000; Meyer, 2004). The findings obtained points out that if supervisors' always ask parties to conflict to forego something vital in order to arrive at a compromise without doing in depth analysis to understand what led to the conflict for the sake of the organization employees would be peeved and the results would be CWB.

The study again found that dominating style was positively related to CWB. . This finding is again supported by Moorman, 1991; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000. These researchers argue that employees who were not given fair hearing in the resolution of a conflict may develop negative attitude to work or their organization such as low organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB). The finding basically posit that supervisors who use position power to solve conflict between workers may incur the wrath of the employee who believe he/she has not been given fair hearing with the conflict resolution and this may lead to CWB.

Finally, the study found again a positive relationship between obliging style of managing conflict and CWB. This finding was supported by a similar study by (Aquino, 2000; Ayoko, Callan and Härtel, 2003; Baillien & De Witte, 2009). Their findings linked conflict to being a target of bullying through "productive" (i.e. "problem-solving") and "destructive" (i.e. "yielding", "avoiding" or "fighting") conflict management styles, cited in Baillien, Bollen and De Witte (2011). The findings above clearly denote that bullying which is a form of CWB has links with management styles adopted by the supervisors. For instance, when supervisors adopt the use of yielding (Obliging) it is likely to push employees to engage in destructive activities within the organization while problem solving approach where employees are made to freely express their opinion with regard to the genesis of the conflict would course the employees to go beyond the assigned duties. This in turn would impact positively on employees' productivity. In other words, the more supervisors' satisfy a party to conflict because of his worth to the organization and the other party whose emotions were disregarded would be more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviours just to pay the organization for the treatment meted out to him/her.

Conclusion

Conflict management is undoubtedly one of the major things supervisors do on a day to day basis unfortunately many supervisors do not have the emotional ability to choose the appropriate conflict management style. In other words, even though there are many styles of managing conflict the ability to choose the appropriate conflict management style depends on the situation and ability of the supervisors. Even though most people see conflict as negative events that affect the growth of the organization it is vital to point out that conflict may not be as bad as people portray it be because proper management of conflict can lead to innovation within the firm.

Recommendation

The study recommends that future researchers should use emotional intelligence as a moderator to see whether supervisors' who score high on emotionally intelligent would be able to manage conflict better than supervisors who score low on emotional intelligence.

Organizations are advised to organize refresher courses on conflict management for supervisors' and subordinates. This would help organizations to know that conflict is part and parcel of individuals, hence learning the appropriate conflict management styles will be appropriate than erasing it completely since it cannot be achieved.

The study recommends that future studies should increase the sample to see if a different result could be obtained.

Limitation

Due to financial constraint the researcher only used organizations located in greater Accra, however due to the fact that different organizations from various sectors of the business world were used this study worth generalizing.

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