

Critical Analysis of Employees' Interaction at Different Levels in the Institutions of Higher Learning in Kenya

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Abstract

This study was aimed at determining the level of interaction between the two cadres of employees at Egerton University Njoro Campus. Stress affects an individual's physical and mental health, performance and interpersonal relationships. This study involved a survey of 100 non-teaching staff of the Njoro Campus. A proportionate random sample was obtained after the stratification of employees by cadre and gender. The questionnaire was done, and necessary modifications were implemented before the actual data collection. Data on employee personal traits, job cadre, educational background, attitude to work and stress coping strategies were collected using a questionnaire and self-report test. Data collected were analysed by use of descriptive and inferential statistics. The research found that the level of interaction between the two cadres of employees of Egerton University is good; hence, stress has a significant effect on job performance and interpersonal relationships among the employees. There is a need to establish a staff-support centre at the University, where employees can be offered emotional and psychological support through professional counselling.

Key terms: Higher learning, institution, interaction, levels of employees.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is an issue in human life. This is perhaps due to its role in determining how human beings relate, work and interact with each other. Insecurity, lack of confidence and withdrawal tendencies associated with stress lead to lack of performance, poor working relations and indulgence in unhealthy relationships among the workers. Stress is invisible, but its effects are great. Unexplained interpersonal misunderstanding, infighting and industrial action by members of staff have become a common phenomenon not only at Egerton University but also in other Kenyan public universities. Little has been done on the role of stress in interpersonal relationships and work performance in Kenya and, in particular, within the public universities. This study established the impact of stress on work and interpersonal relationships among the non-teaching staff, which was the main cause of employees' discontent with one another as well as with the management of the University: a case of Egerton University, Kenya.

It is a great challenge to all organisations to properly diagnose various causes of stress by identifying the problem and discovering more about it, then designing and implementing interventions and lastly, evaluating the effectiveness of the interventions (Mitchell & Larson, 1987). When people are stressed, it is very hard for them to relate well with others. If this happens within an organisation, then it can lead to problems such as low productivity, neglect of responsibility, high personnel turnover, lack of cooperation among personnel, antagonistic action and pairing, increased errors, accidents, thefts, replacement, lack of creativity, poor judgement, poor memory and premature retirement. It is about time that organisations consider their employees' mental health and equip them with skills to cope favourably with stress (Mumiukha, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress is not limited to life and death situations. It can be positive or negative, although only its negative tends to be emphasised. The good things that happen to us, as well as bad ones, cause stress because they carry with them adductive demands that require change or adaptation if an individual is to meet his or her needs (Morris, 1988). According to

Selye (1956), "a complete absence of stress means death. A limited amount of stress is necessary in order to accomplish goals and projects".

Fears and phobias are among the symptoms of stress. Phobia is an immense fear of a situation that is out of all proportion to a situation that evokes it. They are subdivided into three categories, namely, simple phobia, which may be a fear of animals or nature, e.g. fear of snakes. Social phobia is a manifested abnormal fear of meeting new people, eating with others, etc. Agoraphobia is a network of fears and avoidance that is associated with a feeling of being trapped, where there is an easy escape to a place of security. Other symptoms of stress include irritability and anger, eating disorder, excessive drinking, sleeping problems, tranquillisers addiction, chronic fatigue, 'headaches, low self-esteem, blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, nervousness, social withdrawal, lack of coherent thought process and inhibited sexual desire (Melgosa, 2001). In addition, stress is important in spurring us to achieve our ambitions and so adds to the quality of our lives. It is when stress becomes severe or prolonged that problems can arise, and stress can then become a very serious problem.

Stress has two origins. These are internal and external factors. Internal factors include one's personality, temperaments and level of one's self-control. External factors include environment, job, family or studies. Melgosa (2001) states that when the external stress is particularly strong, even the best-equipped people suffer stress. On the other hand, when someone is psychologically fragile, even the weakest stress factors affect him or her.

Stress in the workplace can be caused by many factors or a single factor. Moreover, it can impact both employees and employers alike. As stated by the Canadian health association: fear of job redundancy, lay-offs, economic uncertainties, and overtime working cuts backs act as negative stressors (Tooley, 1996). Workers who feel pressured to perform can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing efforts to achieve the set targets but end up demotivated. The performance takes its toll on job satisfaction. Job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, drug abuse, sickness, and negative internal

competition, among others, are the products of an over-stressed workplace. Job position does not influence the level of stress in the place of work (Borthwick, 1996). This concurs with the findings of this study. According to Gherman (1981), the following factors cause stress in the work environment. Job overload; lack of job description, taboos, job fit, production quota, communication breakdown, involuntary transfers, delayed salary, poor working conditions, lack of job satisfaction, unrealistic expectations and poor relationships among workers.

Mulligan (1998) states that stress can affect one in four different ways that cause physical pain. They include behaviourally by affecting the way one acts, mentally by impairing local thinking, emotionally creating tension, anxiety and irritability, headaches and stomach upsets. According to Selye (1956), the general adaptation syndrome (GAS) represents the body's defence against stress. Selye says that the first symptom of stress, just like other diseases are identical, or trauma, are virtually identical; that is, the body responds in the same way to any stressor, whether it is external and environmental or it arises from within the body itself. What makes a potential stressor stressful is the individual's reaction to it (Berger, 1989).

The seriousness of stress in one's life depends on how one interprets it. Mitchell and Larson (1987), as quoted in Mumiukha (2003), state that stress clearly

causes chemical changes in the brain. Many of these chemicals are related to high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, gastric distress and immunological dysfunction leading to infections, asthma, some cancers and various somatic pain syndromes such as chronic headaches and low back pains. Psychological processes lead to depression, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia. Stress also results in behavioural consequences such as smoking, alcohol and drug abuse and the accident process (Mumiukha, 2003).

Tables 1 and 2 shows the consequences of too much stress on cognitive and behavioural areas. They further show how the body responds to high levels of stress. Clearly, many changes take place when an individual is stressed. When one is unable on perceives that he or she cannot cope with a situation, the hypothalamus gland sends hormonal messages to the adrenal glands to produce stress hormones that are adrenaline, noradrenalin, and cortisol. These cause increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system. This means that the blood pressure, heart, respiration and perspiration rates increase. At the same time, blood vessels and muscles constrict, making an individual feel tense. The release of stress hormones activates the enteric nervous system, which is situated in the stomach, causing, in severe cases, irritable bowel syndrome and colitis (Edworthy 2000).

Table 1: Cognitive Area

CHARACTERISTICS	EFFECTS
Concentration & attention	Difficulty in concentrating on a demanding activity: frequent loss of attention
Memory response speed	Short-term and long-term memory problems which need an immediate and spontaneous response are solved in haphazard and unpredictable ways.
Analysis of present and future situations	The mind is unable to accurately analyse the present situations or project them into the future.
Logic and organisation of thought processes	Thinking does not follow logical and coherent thought patterns but is disorganised.
Nervousness hypochondriacal	Difficulty relaxing emotionally and physically, in addition to normal physical illness, new illnesses are suspected.
Personality traits	Development of impatience, intolerance, authoritarianism and the lack of consideration for others
Ethics	Ethical and moral principles which govern life relax, and there is less self-control.
Depression and discouragement	Increased discouragement, decreased desire to live.
Self-esteem	Thoughts of worthlessness and inferiority

Source: Melgosa (2001)

Table 2: Behavioural Area

CHARACTERISTICS	EFFECTS
Language	Inability to verbally address a group of people satisfactorily, stuttering. Inability to speak fluently
Interests	Lack of enthusiasm for preferred activities such as hobbies or favourite pastimes
Absences stimulants	Absenteeism from work or school increases in consumption of alcohol, tobacco, coffee or drug use
Energy	Every day the energy levels fluctuation tends to be on the low side
Sleep	Sleep patterns change. Generally, insomnia increases to levels of extreme deprivation.
Relationships	A tendency towards suspicion increases. A tendency to blame others and put the responsibility for mistakes upon others
Change in behaviour	The appearance of tics and strange reactions which are not normally a part of the person
Suicide	Thoughts of suicide increase along with suicide attempts

Source: Melgosa (2001)

Table 3: Emotional Area

CHARACTERISTICS	EFFECTS
Nervousness	Difficulty relating emotionally and physically
Hypochondriacal	In addition to normal physical illness, new illnesses are suspected.
Personality traits	Development of impatience, intolerance, authoritarianism and the lack of consideration for others.
Ethics	Ethical and moral principles govern life release, and there is less self-control.
Depression and discouragement	Increased discouragement, decreased desire to live.
Self-esteem	Thoughts of worthlessness and inferiority

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive survey and aimed at determining the level of interaction between the two cadres of employees at Egerton University Njoro Campus. The study was conducted at the Njoro campus of Egerton University. The target population for this study was the non-teaching staff comprising 1570. The actual population included in the sampling frame was 769 employees in the I-IV and A-F cadres. A sample was acquired by stratified random sampling technique. Classification of the employees was based on the grading system of the University. There were four strata, two from each grade level: I-IV and A-F. In every stratum, employees were classified according to sex so as to give a sub-stratum. A proportionate sample was taken from each sub-stratum based on the number of employees in the respective sub-strata. In collecting information, a questionnaire was administered. A pilot study was carried out in Laikipia Campus, Egerton University, to validate the instrument and test its reliability. Twenty subjects were selected, and the questionnaires were administered to them. The validity of the stress inventory was determined by running it concurrently with the already validated Colien's perceived stress scale. The scores on both tests produced similar

results. The reliability measure is based on the Cronbach alpha scale scored .74 reliabilities. The SPSS programme was used to analyse data. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for analysis. Descriptive statistics included frequency counts, percentages and mean, while inferential statistics included t-tests and ANOVA. All significant tests were done at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to establish whether there is a healthy interaction between employees regardless of their positions. Although previous results indicated that stress does affect the process of interaction among the non-academic staff to a large extent, these interactions are varied and dependent on the grade of the employee. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that there is more interaction between the two cadres of non-academic staff, but not so much between them and the lecturers. Employees in the A-F cadre indicated a 95.3% level of interaction with other members of the same level, 97.7% interaction with members of the I-IV cadre and 67.4% interaction with the lecturers (as shown in table 4).

Table 4: Levels of Interaction between A-F Cadres with other Members of Staff.

Grade	Very often	Often	Rarely
Lecturer	12 (27.9%)	17 (39.5%)	14 (32.6%)
A-F	32 (74.4%)	9 (20.9%)	2 (4.6%)
I-IV	27 (62.8%)	15 (34.9%)	1 (2.3%)

n = 43

Table 5: Levels of Interaction between I-IV Cadres with other Members of Staff.

Grade	Very often	Often	Rarely
Lecturer	10 (32.2%)	8 (25.8%)	13 (42.0%)
A-F	14 (45.2%)	15 (48.4%)	2 (6.4%)
I-IV	24 (77.4%)	6 (19.4%)	1 (3.2%)

n = 31

Overall, there are significant levels of interaction between the two cadres of non-academic staff and lower levels of interaction between both cadres and the lecturers. Maybe a possible explanation is that these cadres of employees have a lot of things in common (for example, common working hours, areas of residence and maybe work in the same areas);

while the lecturers would most likely be in different areas of operation where they don't have an opportunity to interact with the non-academic staff. Another possible explanation for this minimal interaction with lecturers is that there could be class consciousness on the part of the lecturers such that

they would not interact freely with the lower cadre staff.

These observations are in agreement with Melgosa (2001), who believes strongly that one's grade can determine his or her interaction with each other if all other factors remain constant. On the other hand, Powell (2000) disagrees with the findings of this research objective. He believes that grade does not affect the way people interact as long as each of them operates within their own areas of jurisdiction and do it perfectly well.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concluded that the level of interaction between the two cadres of employees of Egerton University is standard. The employees interact well across the two cadres identified.

Recommendations: The study, therefore, recommended that a fitness centre should be put in place, complete with a diet advising section. In addition, non-teaching staff should take vacations and ensure that their leave days are fully utilised.

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