



Factors Influencing Working Relationships among Academic Staff in Ugandan Universities

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Abstract

Workplace relationships are a must in any organizational setting, including universities. This is because the workplace comprises individuals who have to interact with each other while executing their duties and responsibilities. The kinds of work relationships that exist among academic staff may depend on a number of factors. This study explored the various factors affecting the working relationships among academic staff in Ugandan universities. The study employed a qualitative research approach. It reviewed current literature on working relationships among employees and tried to apply it to universities. Also, the study established four theories of workplace relationships: post-positivism, critical theory, social construction, and structuration. This study further highlighted twelve factors that impact working relationships among employees: trust, respect, collaboration, communication, varied interaction, diversity and inclusion, compassion and empathy, mindfulness, inter-relatedness, employee engagement, and leadership styles. The study recommended that universities in Uganda should monitor these factors and their impact on the quality of workplace relationships to maintain their competitive advantage. Short of that, they stand a high risk of losing out in their search for students, which may ultimately affect their enrollment.

Keywords

Workplace relationships, Academic staff, Universities

INTRODUCTION

The workplace plays a very important role in many people's lives since most of them spend more time at work than in any other activity. This fact does not exclude academic staff at universities. Academic staff spends a lot of time at their universities teaching, preparing for their lectures, attending staff events, attending to students, and doing research, among others. It is paramount that these academics relate well and receive support from superiors, peers, colleagues, subordinates, and students, among others. The relationships that exist amongst academic staff can determine their effective execution of duties and how well they relate to students (Akinyemi, Nkonki, Baleni, & Mudehwe-Gonhovi, 2020). If beneficial, the relationships between academic staff can boost productivity and decrease it if they are toxic (Khawaja, 2020). Further, that relationship can determine their level of satisfaction with their job. Good workplace relationships are therefore a prerequisite for academic staff experience in universities, hence the need for such a study.

This study therefore aims at examining the factors that influence working relationships amongst academic staff in Ugandan universities. It is worth noting that there is a lot of competition for students due to the outburst of many universities in Uganda, and it is important that universities ensure quality in all activities they engage in. However, since

teaching and learning are the core activities taking place at universities, yet they are carried out by academic staff, the relationships between these staff can either make or break the universities' competitive advantage, resulting in a decline in performance that could impact the quality of graduates from the universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Odhong and Omolo (2014) carried out a study to investigate the determinants of employee relationships at Waridi Limited in Kenya. They focused on such determinants as recruitment, collective bargaining, working environment, communication, and remuneration. They used a descriptive research design to conduct their study. They employed stratified random sampling to select four hundred twenty (420) respondents to participate in the study. They used questionnaires to collect primary data. They analyzed the data they collected using qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. They established that communication and information patterns were the major determinants of employee relations at Waridi Ltd. They further established that negotiation in the form of collective bargaining enhanced the clarity of job descriptions as well as employee job performance. Generally, the study established that employee trust, handling of employee complaints, their loyalty to the organization, sincere communal negotiation, and teamwork greatly influenced working relationships amongst employees.

Nuse (2018) carried out a study to establish the determinants of working relationships between managers and subordinates in selected companies on selected minor league baseball teams in Western Kentucky. The study sought to determine the relationship between the values held by employees and the extent to which business leaders adapted their business practices to each of these values. The survey was carried out via email using employees and employers from AAA Minor League Baseball teams. Nine values were developed by a panel of experts within Minor League Baseball management and human resources departments. Teams were asked to distribute the survey to employees and employers and were provided a link to the questionnaire. The study established that trust was the major factor influencing the relationship between the employer and employees, as well as the values held by both. The researchers hoped that the results of the study would help business leaders gain insight into the improvement of both employee and supervisor success for the vitality of the organization.

Ganesan and Wee (2014) also carried out a study to explore the determinants of employee working relationships in selected organizations in Malaysia. They used a sample size of one hundred thirty-eight (138) organized employees who participated in the study. They used self-administered questionnaires to collect data from the employees. They analyzed the data with the help of descriptive, correlation, and multiple regression analyses. Their study established that organizational culture, management style, trade union, and employee commitment influenced working relationships among employees. However, they established that management style was the major determinant of employee working relationships in the selected organizations. The study concluded that a supportive management style, conducive organizational culture, trade union with strategic initiatives, and high employee commitment greatly enhanced employee working relationships.

A study carried out by Nazarian, Atkinson, Foroudi, and Soares (2021) on factors affecting working relationships between leadership and Job satisfaction in Iranian HR departments established that employee attitudes towards team working within the HR department itself indicated attitudes towards HRM principles concerning how to enable employees to work together effectively that could affect job satisfaction, and so compromise the full implementation of HRM practices. The study also established that teamwork depended on a sense of trust and belonging, and managers needed to endeavor to promote an organizational culture that fosters these two aspects.

Davuluri, Vempala, and Mondisa (2022) conducted a literature review study on how best to build relationships and collaborations among community colleges, Higher Education Institutions, and companies. They fostered a research collaboration between faculty, administrators, and researchers at two community colleges, two universities, and several professional welding organizations. The project intended to study and improve the educational experiences, outcomes, and career pathways of welding technology (WT) students. During the facilitation of this project, the team successfully cultivated and leveraged relationships and partnerships to help inform the study. This enabled the project team to recognize the importance of capturing how they developed and leveraged these relationships to address project needs and produce desired results.

They conducted the study to understand team science and cross-organizational collaborations. They identified some best practices for successful collaboration in multidisciplinary and cross-organizational work. They found out that to establish a successful collaboration, focus should be put on the skills offered, and on the diversity, communication, and trust within the team. They therefore recommended establishing a framework that recognizes and includes all the skills and diversity of team members as well as the practice of interpersonal skill development to foster trust and more open communication. They also established that their team had developed practices of making information accessible for all people involved on the project and facilitating concise plans for meetings to keep the project moving efficiently. Therefore, according to their study, it can be deduced that trust, communication and diversity were key in fostering good working relationships amongst employees themselves and/or with external partners.

Baloch, Manzoor and Qayum, (2016) conducted a study on the factors affecting employer-employee relationship in police sector of Pakistan. They explored factors affecting employer- employee relationship with inclusion of mediator, workplace condition. The factors included collective bargaining, recruitment, remuneration, and communication. They collected primary data from police departments working in four provinces of Pakistan namely, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,

Sindh, Punjab and Baluchistan. They administered questionnaires among the top, middle and the bottom leadership. For validation of data collection instrument, they conducted a confirmatory factor analysis via structure equation model and they found all models with significant loadings. For measuring the direct and mediating effect of the study, they used hierarchical linear regression model. They established that collective bargaining, recruitment, communication and remuneration had significant positive effect on employer-employee relationship whereas, workplace condition partially mediated the relationship amidst the selected factors and employer- employee relationship. The study also revealed that inclusion of collective bargaining, recruitment, communication and remuneration inside the organization resulted in better performance of the police department and led to trust building and better image of police department in Iran.

METHODOLOGY

Using search terms such as work relationships, academic staff or academics, and universities among others, a qualitative methodology was chosen to guide in locating relevant literature for this study by looking through databases and reference lists. The information and conclusions presented in this study are the results of a meta-analysis of the literature obtained from secondary sources specifically publications. These key terms were searched for in the paper as one of the criteria for selecting published content for review, typically in the theoretical explanations, the study findings, as well as the conclusions and discussion. This evaluation, which also includes the authors' opinions and a quick summary of the studies and reviews related to Work relationships, is not intended to be exhaustive or abstract.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Perspective of Workplace Relationships

In this section, theories that relate to workplace relationships are highlighted so as to extract from them the various factors that influence the working relationships amongst academic staff in universities.

Theories of Workplace relationships

According to Sias (2008), the following theories are important in workplace relationships. That is, post positivism, Social Construction, critical and structuration theories.

Post positivism Theory and Workplace Relationships

According to the theory, workplace relationships are indicated by such factors as individual self-report assessments as well as communication assessments (Sias, 2008). Individual self-report assessments include a measure of supervisor-subordinate relationship quality, whereas communication assessments include self-reports of the communication frequency between individuals, topics they communicate about, as well as the satisfaction they have with coworker communication (Sias, 2008).

Sias (2008), posits that the post positivism theory examines and assesses observable indicators of workplace relationships such as communication and attitudinal measures. Such indicators include, how certain communication practices indicate and predict relationship quality; how relationship quality or quantity predicts observable organizational results such as employee satisfaction, productivity, and links between workplace relationships and the context in which they exist among others.

Social Construction Theory and Workplace Relationships

This theory posits that workplace relationships exist where there is interaction between different people. According to Anderson (2012), social construction theory lays the ground work for any research in interpersonal relationships. The theory assumes that relationships are established in human behavior and are formed by the interaction that exists between people (Anderson, 2012). This means that social construction theory focuses on communication behavior between different people who interact with each other as well as their relationship dynamics and processes. For example; the relationship and interaction between academic heads of departments and the subordinate staff within the departments. This examination specifies the nature of their relationship and shows the real construction, preservation, as well as alteration of the relationship. According to Fairhurst and Chandler (1989) as cited in Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, and Fix (2004), relationships between supervisors and subordinates, or between subordinates and subordinates may either be functional or dysfunctional, and employees may transform their relationships with others.

Critical Theory and Workplace Relationships

Critical theory conceptualizes language and communication as core to understanding organizational processes (Sias, 2008). According to the theory, workplace relationships are a result of human interaction and the relationship can either change or remain stable with member interaction. The theory postulates that, a relationship only exists between people who interact with each other, and its quality and nature depend on the quality and nature of the interaction of its members (Sias, 2008). Critical theory, however, conceptualizes relationships to be socially constructed with sites of power, domination, resistance, and struggle. In relationships, individual members construct their knowledge, identities, and understanding of organizational processes, goals, and values.

Critical theory focuses on how individuals such supervisors, and coworkers communicatively ratify and abuse power and control in workplace relationships. It also focuses on how participation in workplace relationships constructs and maintains organizational power and domination systems; how communication and discourse include and exclude

individuals from participation in relationship networks; as well as how workplace relationships provide, or deny, access to voice and influence (Mumby, 2000). It also focuses on the processes by which some workplace relationship dynamics, such as hierarchy in the supervisor-subordinate relationship or discrimination in a cross-gender coworker relationship, become reified and considered to be natural (Rollo, 2022). Therefore, communication and interaction are central to critical theory.

Structuration Theory and Workplace Relationships

The theory postulates that a social system takes place through the replicated societal practices, or structures of actors or their groups which engender and rebuild the system (Giddens, 1984). This implies that according to the theory, structure may either be an outcome or a medium. As an outcome, during interaction, structure is generated and reproduced. As a medium for interaction, actors draw upon established structural elements, such as rules, regulations and resources in their actions. Whereas rules are the implied guidelines for action, resources refer to people's contribution to the interaction such as their possessions, personal traits, skills, abilities, knowledge (Sias, 2008). Therefore, structure enables actors to take part in system practices thereby enhancing human behavior. For example, if the teacher exhibits the right teaching behavior and possesses the right teaching resources such as a lecture room, visual aids, content and content knowledge, his or her classroom delivery will definitely be awesome. Likewise, human behavior has the ability to produce and reproduce structure. Therefore, every time a teacher conducts a lecture, he or she reproduces a teaching structure. During interaction, when people utilize rules and other resources, production takes place. When actions reinforce existing system features, reproduction takes place. This give and take process referred to as the duality of structure according to Sias (2008). This reproduction of structure generates and maintains systems.

Structuration theory conceptualizes workplace relationships to exist in entities where people interact with one another, and as interaction changes, the relationship also changes (Sias, 2008). According to the theory workplace relationships are enabled and at the same time inhibited by structures that guide, while limiting interaction. For example, the communication between faculty members and their peers is different from that with their managers and subordinates. It can therefore be deduced that workplace relationships founded on the basis of structuration theory would unearth the structures that enable and constrain various workplace relationships. These discoveries may include the structures that govern and distinguish manager-subordinate relationships from those with peers, how workplace relationship structures become, institutionalized at the societal level such as the extent to which workplace dynamics are reproduced across establishments, how the structures surpass time and space such as how they are transported across countries in transnational organizations, and how individuals transform, instead of reproducing workplace relationship structures. From these theories, the researcher draws out communication, varied interaction, trust and respect to be among the factors influencing working relationships amongst academic staff in universities.

Factors Impacting Working Relationships among Employees

The results presented in this section are a result of a meta-analysis of the literature obtained by looking through databases and reference lists of publications related to working relationships. The analysis unveiled a range of factors affecting the working relationships amongst academic staff in universities which can make or break the universities' competitive advantage depending on intensity.

According to Ryba (2019), and Miuro (2022), workplace relationships are multifaceted like the individuals involved in them. They comprise of a number of determinants for the way employees feel about others as well as their workplace. Ertel (1999) as cited in Khawaja (2020) states that good working relationships depend on an amalgamation of respect, perceived need, obligation, and friendship that empower individuals to accomplish tasks assigned; absence of these relationships, can lead to rejection or resistance towards even the best ideas. Khawaja (2020) stresses that strong connections between people keep them engaged with their establishments and motivated to make higher achievements. Nonetheless, Khawaja (2020) advises that it is important to foster and uphold such relationships. According to Sias & Cahill, (1998), workplace features such as proximity, climate, and workload have an impact on employee working relationships. Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, (2003) add that employee working relationships may also depend on employee physical attributes, such as gender.

Scholars such as Tallia, et al (2006), Ryba (2019) as well as Ganesan and Siew (2014), have identified the following as factors that can influence working relationships among employees. That is, trust, diversity, mindfulness, respect, varied interaction and effective communication among others. According to Tallia, et al. (2006) and, Gennard and Judge (2010), the following factors are handy in influencing the working relationships amongst academic staff.

Trust: Trust does the groundwork for any fruitful collaboration. When academic staff trust each other, they are in a position to consult one another and also use the input from the colleague(s). When academics have confidence in each other, they amenably deliberate upon achievements and failures to acquire a lesson therefrom. Examples of trust in the academia include a faculty member consulting a colleague from the same department about a particular topic he is to teach. This enables the member to teach the topic to the learners in a way that makes it easier to understand. Trust can also be exhibited when heads of department make decisions based on the input of department members. For example, when reviewing curricula of different programs. According to Ryba (2019), trust amongst academic staff may manifest in vulnerability to colleagues' input and ideas, trust in them and managers to execute their duties effectively, discussing achievements and setbacks comfortably, as well as readiness to share candid and specified feedback when required.

Diversity and Inclusion: Diversity refers to variances in the way individuals perceive the world. It may emanate from ethnicity, gender, education, experience, age, and race, among others. In a university, like any other work setting, some diversity of thought may take place. Successful universities encourage and tolerate diversity of opinions and this greatly helps in effective networking and collaboration (Tallia, et al, 2006). Diversity enables faculty to learn from one another and increases potential solutions to existing problems. This consequently leads to improvement in the quality of graduates and teaches students to exhibit tolerance and respect for all their colleagues regardless of the differences amongst them. According to Ryba (2019), employees prefer inclusive companies, enjoy higher cash flow, prioritize diversity. Understanding employee insights on diversity and inclusion can help to improve the work relationships (Ryba, 2019).

Mindfulness: This means openness to new ideas (Tallia, et al, 2006). According to Brown and Ryan (2003), mindfulness denotes a state of passive attentiveness and awareness of present conscious experiences. Glomb, Duffy, Bono, and Yang (2011), posit that mindfulness enables individuals to regulate their thoughts, behaviors and emotions. Consequently, this enhances employee working relationships and renders employees more resilient which results in improved job performance. Mindfulness prevents actions without thought, and inspires academic staff to put their thoughts across without fear of derision, criticism or punishment, while seeking for strategies for continuous learning and improvement (Aikens, et al, 2014). According to Limphaibool (2017), mindfulness programs in the workplace may lead to decreased absenteeism and employee turnover, improved employee relationships with clients as well as and improved job satisfaction among workers. These may positively impact on the overall work environment.

Interrelatedness: This occurs when academic staff are sensitive to their duties and responsibilities as well as understand how their work affects other employees (Tallia, et al, 2006). They know how everyone contributes to departmental, organizational and societal goals and objectives. When this happens, academic staff can ably deal with any uncertainties in the organization as a result of their awareness of how their work affects others and the relationship that exists between them and other employees.

Respect: The respect academic staff have for each other influences their relationships. Respectful interactions are thoughtful, truthful and diplomatic. Academic staff need to value the opinions of colleagues and be keen to alter their attitude basing on those opinions. Respect especially helps in thought-provoking academic situations, as it can assist academic staff in concentrating on finding solutions to existing problems amongst them. According to Ryba (2019), academic staff can demonstrate respect for others by giving honest and regular feedback, treating colleagues with courtesy and kindness, as well as talking less and listening more. Managers can demonstrate respect by equipping employees with all they need to accomplish assigned duties and responsibilities, and accord them the sovereignty and plasticity to do that work provide while recognizing them for work well done.

Varied Interaction: Practically, relationships can either be social or task related (Tallia, et al, 2006). Social working relationships are personal and base on external activities to the organization whereas task-related relationships focus on professionalism (Tallia, et al, 2006). Accordingly, both types of relationships are not mutually exclusive. Universities need to encourage both types of relationships as they both contribute to effectiveness in the execution of assigned duties and responsibilities.

Communication: Communication has the ability to make or break working relationships amongst academic staff. Academic staff should be able to send and receive information effectively as well as provide feedback. According to Tallia, et al (2006), communication between academic staff can either be rich or lean. Academics need to use rich communication channels, such as telephone conversations and face-to-face interaction, for unclear or emotional messages or those that may need clarification. They may use lean channels, such as memos and e-mails, for repetitive or routine messages. However, it is advisable to use either of the two types of channels where they are most appropriate because both are not suitable for each and every situation. In other words, they are not a one-size-fits-it all. However, there may also be those situations that may require the usage of both. Therefore, the channel one uses may have an impact on the strength of the working relationship one has with others depending on the level of interaction offered.

Empathy and Compassion: Being human beings, academic staff wish to be cared for by their institutions, their superiors, colleagues, teammates and subordinates. Compassion starts with empathy and it means having the desire to help others and to make them happy, by putting oneself in other's shoes. According to Ryba (2019), when employees are compassionate, they are eager to take an extra mile to help others, know each other on a personal level, as well as support each other in good and bad times; managers as well prioritize team building activities and team development. The results of a study by Gentry, Weber, and Sadri (2016) revealed that compassion and empathy enhanced the creation of a supportive and protective work environment that promoted effective job performance.

Collaboration: In organizations where collaboration is highly valued, employees scrutinize and solve problems together and they are aware of the power in sharing ideas. Ryba (2019), states that when employees work together, their level of accountability and energy increases. This can be enabled by teamwork, openness, honesty, and feedback amongst

academic staff. According to Anderson and Gehart (2007), collaboration improves interpersonal relationships since team members learn to count on others for motivation, support, as well as feedback. Likewise, collaboration gives employees the chance to listen to and hear and reflect on a number of viewpoints as they learn to respect alternative and differing ideas.

Employee Engagement: This denotes a positive attitude employees exhibit towards the organization, its objectives, mission, vision and values (Tallia, et al, 2006). When employees are engaged, they are ever informed of whatever is happening in the organization, and work with others to improve job performance, achieve organizational goals and objectives as well as improve overall organizational performance (Ehrhardt, 2014). Managers in organizations need to develop and foster employee engagement which necessitates a two-way relationship between them and the employees (Robinson et al, 2004, Markos, and Sridevi, 2010). In 2003, a study carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) through consultation of Human Resource (HR) professionals from forty-six (46) organizations established among others, that engaged employees respected and helped their colleagues, and had a willingness to go the extra mile to help out colleagues; this helped in building courteous and assertive working relationships amongst employees (Robinson et al, 2004).

Leadership Styles: According to Mardanov, Heischmidt and Henson (2008) the trust relationship between the leader and employees determines the latter's character. This consequently means that the leadership style used by managers in universities determines the level of trust subordinate academic staff may have in the former. Autocratic leaders make employees to lose trust in them which may greatly impact on the working relationships between them. Likewise, democratic leaders and managers earn the trust of their subordinates which consequently leads to a good working relationship between the two groups.

Conflict Management: Because universities comprise individuals with diverse backgrounds, conflicts become inevitable. However, the way in which these conflicts are managed may determine the working relationship that may remain between the parties involved in the conflict. A study carried out by Miiro (2020) on conflict management in Higher Education Institutions established that conflicts can lead to misunderstanding among workers but can however be curbed through reconciliation whereby, the parties involved in the conflict can be involved in negotiations so as to reach a win-win situation. The study also revealed that to manage conflicts in HEIs staff may be transferred from one working place which may result in creation of harmony and improved working relations among workers with in the institution.

Employee Involvement: Employee involvement gives employees the opportunity to utilize their private information, which enhances decision making (Williamson, 2008). According to Moschetto (2013), employee involvement encompasses the incorporation of employee inputs in decision making during the formulation of crucial organizational decisions. It involves both the ability of employees to state their grievances to management as well as the ability of management to respond to these grievances by including employees in the organizational decision-making process (Moschetto 2013).

Employee involvement facilitates employee work relationships by increasing their interest in the realization of organizational objectives, improving the quality of decisions made by managers and supervisors as well as making employees ready to take on authority and forego resistance to change (Muindi, 2011). Further employee involvement facilitates working relationships by improving commitment to shared goals and objectives, increasing shared leadership, enhancing open and honest communication, as well as improving cooperation, trust and shared commitment as well as collaboration and accountability, amongst employees (Kumari and Kumari, 2014; Obiekwe, Zeb-Obipi, and Ejo-Orusa, 2019). Thus, employee involvement leads to improved employee working relationships which may consequently lead to job satisfaction as the employee feels valued by the organization.

CONCLUSION

The factors explored are paramount in ensuring good working relationships amongst academic staff. Universities need to continuously monitor these factors in addition to measuring their impact on workplace relationships. Short of that, universities in Uganda might be unable to maintain their competitive advantage over others. This is because academic staff are the key drivers of whatever takes place in universities and relationships among them are of great importance. Poor relationships among these staff may lead to decreased productivity and poor service delivery. These may consequently impact on the quality of graduates that these universities send to the job market and ultimately the reputation of the Universities may also be at stake.

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