



Stress Management and Employee Counselling: It's Imperative to the Nigerian Public Service

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Abstract

The paper highlights the importance and the major causes of employee stress, and provides explanations on stress management and employee counselling as a major tool for managing stress in organizations. This work delves and relies heavily on secondary source of data. It also employs the Person Environment fit model theory in its explanation and analysis which believes that both external and internal causative factors are referred to as stressors, and the resulting state of the individual - poor physical health, job dissatisfaction, turn-over as stress. The model posits that for stress to be properly understood, it must be seen as an outcome of interaction of characteristics of both the focal individual [person, employee or worker] and his environment. Person-Environment Fit States Some of the stressors common to Nigerian public servants, include incessant power failure, bad roads, road congestions, environmental hazards among few. the paper concludes by Recommending for the establishment of counselling units in organizations, provision of infrastructure like good roads to reduce road congestions, provision of stable power supply, and payment of living wage.

Keywords: stress management, employee, counselling, public service, organization

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Introduction

Medical Health experts worldwide are revealing that the management of stress as the most critical wellness issue facing the contemporary world (Oruebtor, 2007). Life is generally a struggle in the course of the struggle, man experiences various types of emotions and heart travails which are associated in most cases with various mental and physical disorders. Stress is an important factor in the causation of diseases and unhealthy habits. With the recent Public Service Reform of 2004, which has made the Nigerian public service more like a corporate enterprise, the public service is now driven more by profit motives than the provision of social services as it was used to be under the traditional public administration. If this is to be achievable, the public sector has to employ some of the techniques of the private sector, and the welfare of the worker is so paramount in this regard.

In Nigeria, people invariably experiences stress in varying degree and in every situation

of life, depending on the differences in behavioral responses made by each person. This is because the complexity of modern life practically guarantees that almost everyone will be confronted from time to time with embarrassing or dangerous situations that can cause anxiety or stress. In the home and work places, the condition becomes more complex and demanding with concern for optimal expectations and productivity which becomes stressful to employees. (Oruebtor 2012)

Employees are expected to demonstrate competence, commitment and dedication to duties and also are expected to be committed to family responsibility. According to Demerouti et al., (2001) states that under high job demands that is workload, time pressure and work family conflict. The ability to balance this dual pressures and demands makes an individual a man and while the inability to balance the dual pressures and demands makes the individual prone to vulnerable stress and eventually serious emotionally-related diseases such as high



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blood pressure, coronary heart diseases, peptic ulcer and mental disorders which are sometimes deadly. (Cooper and Quick, 2017) Stressors common to Nigerian employees are road congestions, incessant power failure, inadequate water supply among few Ronke (1990). The implication affects the employee's performance at the work place as well as the nation as a whole. The wave of armed robbery, lack of concern for human life, marital instability kidnapping, cybercrime, banditry and generation gap can be linked to individual level of stress among Nigerians. An employee can give his/her best to the organization only if he/ she is in a positive state of mind. A mentally preoccupied or troubled individual will be in a position to give very little to the organization. There is no successful organization that will be free from stress among its employees. Therefore, the need for counselling comes in, where people can talk and attempt to solve personal and work related issues with experienced counselors. Employee counselling arises due to various causes of stress which include: to deal effectively with one's emotions, interpersonal problems, lack of team spirit at workplace, inability to meet job demands, over work-load, confrontation with authority, responsibility and accountability, conflicts with superiors, subordinates and management, various family problems, health problems, career problems, among few. Akinade (2001) states that Counselling is a set of procedures used in assisting individuals in solving problems that arise in various aspects of their lives. Or assisting them to minimize their overall personal development so that they can function properly in the society The professional trained counsellor focus is on the basis that individuals help themselves provided that they receive the right kind of support to handle a stressful situations.

The term 'stress' has been used extensively to mean 'hardship'. But scholars have defined stress in several ways. Stress refers to the process by which an individual perceives and responds to certain events and issues in his/her environment which is called stressors. Davidson and Neale (1986) described stress as "a stimulus that weakens the physiological or psychological capabilities of an individual". In other words, anything that could influence or belabour an individual physically or mentally negatively, constitutes

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a stress. Example of physical stress here could be driving through pot-holes, harsh weather conditions like dust etc., while mental stress could involve domestic violence, superior's lack of appreciation among few. Lazarus (2006) states that stress arises when individuals perceives that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their wellbeing, we experience stress when we feel "out of control, Stress is an emotional state of being which makes series of demands on an individual that may or may not be met by such individual. The demands are either mental or physical. The mental demand stresses the brain while the physical demand stresses the body. The "fight or flight" response is a basic, short-term survival response, which is triggered when we experience a shock, or when we see something that we perceive as a threat. Therefore. If the stress is removed, the body returns to normal, if the stress persists, the individual may either adapt correctly or fail to adapt, failure to adapt is dangerous to health. Our brains then release stress hormones that prepare the body to either "fly" from the threat, or "fight" it. This energizes us, but it also makes us excitable, anxious, and irritable (Gowri, 2016).

Causes of stress

Counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrics and experts in other field has described stress as uncomfortable and unhealthy force that upset our physical, psychological, emotional and mental wellbeing which is caused by different activities, events, and life experiences, such as aggression, quarrelling, fighting, nagging, divorce, conflict, violence, crimes, financial problems, assaults, hostility, family or social commitment, natural and artificial accidents such as flood, earth quake ,erosion, accidents, war, kidnapping among few. Stress in the work place can be seen as a lively situation in which people face constraints, opportunities or loss of something they desire and for which the consequence is both unpredictable as well as critical to the individual and the organization. (Davi 2017)

Stress bring out the best in individual at times. Just like the saying "Necessity is the mother of invention". Necessity is a stressful condition, it induces an individual to improve



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or invent or discover innovative or smarter way of doing things, this positive dimension of stress is called “eustress”. But usually the term stress has a negative implication and this negative aspect of stress is termed “distress” Harassment or frustration by superiors makes the employee, unhappy or unsatisfied with the job and became down-cast, collapse or work harder. Therefore, stress can make some people to breakdown while some people break records due to stress. (Collien 2009)

Stress Management

The most effective way to cope with stress is for a person to deal with the source of stress, or control their reaction to it. Stress has harmful effects on any manager and the recognition of this fact would require the managers to make effort at correcting the situation. Stress management is now a management tool for controlling stress among workers in organizations. Oruebor, (2007) stress management involves controlling and reducing the tensions that occur in stressful situations by causing emotional and physical changes. The degree of stress and the desire to make the changes determine the changes that takes place. Aggarwal, (2007) contended to the fact that human life without stress would be dull, but excess of it, proposes a lot of risk to life therefore, several approaches have been advised by scholars, to ensure proper control and management of stress. Therefore, stress management helps in controlling, reducing or learning how to tolerate threats that leads to stress. Managing the various stressful demands that workers encounter in the work place or transfer from homes the counseling therapist assist the individual worker overcome or cope with those pressing needs or demands which will eventually leads to a boost in productive capacity.

Employee Counselling

Employee counseling at the workplace is a discussion of an employee’s problem that usually has an emotional content to it in order to help the employee cope better. (Ajila, & Adetayo,2013). The counselor listens, understand the problems, advices and suggest ways to solve the problems mainly job related, personal social problems and its confidential.

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Employee counselling can be explained as a discussion with an employee who has some problem or the other, more particularly emotional in nature. In order to help the employee to overcome the emotional stress, so that they can get back to the main track of performance. Employee counseling helps to support the employee to face and sail through difficult times in life. people come across some problems either in their career or personal life and it affects performance, productivity and increase the stress levels of the individual. According to Gerstmann, (2014) posit it that the aim of employees counseling is to assists both the employee and the employers by intervening with an active problem solving approach to tackling the problem at hand. Counselling focuses on the problem, not the employee, it is a face to face rapport/discussion between the employee and supervisors, concerning the conduct and performance. Counselling takes place in context of a helping relationships, where both the counselor and employee work together to resolve a problem, change behaviours and foster personal growth and awareness and the counseling relationship is confidential which aim to offer support and encouraged the employee. Therefore, counseling in an organization, helps the employee to make them aware of their strength and weakness, and also improve on them by providing the employees a conducive environment for growth and development. the basic reasons are to give good communication skills, helping and empowering the employees to develop and increase their effectiveness, in most public organizations in Nigeria today, there is absence of staff counselling units. This to a large extent could explain why there is so much absconds from duties, late coming, and pilfering, petty trading in the work place among few. these directly or indirectly affect productivity in the public sector.

The latest trend catching up in the corporate human resource across the world is employee counselling at the work place. In the world of ever increasing complexity and the stress in the lives, especially the work places of employees, employee counselling has emerged as the latest human resource tool to attract and retain its best employees and also to increase the quality of the work force. There is virtually no organization free of stress or stress free employees. The



Muhammad, A. H. and Muhammad S. Y. employees can be stressed, depressed as mentioned earlier, suffering from too much anxiety arising out of various work place related issues like managing deadlines, meeting targets, lack of time/resources to fulfill personal and family commitments. Therefore, many companies have integrated the counselling services in their organizations and making impart of their culture. Organizations are offering the services of employee counselling to their employees.

Cole (2002) observed that it is in an organization's best interest to avoid uneconomic use of their human resources, and the provision of counseling services may be one way of sustaining employee performance, achieving business targets and commitments to employees as individuals. Counselling of staff is becoming an essential function of managers. The organization can either seek the help of experienced employees or a professional counsellor to take up the counselling activities. Increasing complexities in the lives of the employees need to address various aspects ideally, the need for employee counselling arises when the employee shows signs of declining in performance, being stressed in office-hours, bad decision making etc. In such situations counselling deal with all the aspects related to the employee's performance like the targets, employee's responsibilities, problem faced, employee aspirations, inter-personal relationships at work place etc. Families and friends are inseparable part of the employee's life. Many times, employees carry the baggage of family problems to work places, which in turn affects their performance adversely. Therefore, the counsellor needs to strike a comfort level with the employees and getting them back to work-all fresh and enthusiastic

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, the Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Approach to stress has become widely accepted among organizational stress researchers (Eulberg, Weekley and Bhagat, 1988 as cited in Edwards & Cooper, 2013). The P-E fit theory characterizes stress as a lack of correspondence between characteristics of the person (e.g. abilities, values) and the environment (e.g. demands, supplies). This lack of correspondence is hypothesized to generate deleterious

psychological, physiological and behavioural outcomes (Edwards & Cooper, 2013). This model posits that for stress to be properly understood, it must be seen as an outcome of interaction of characteristics of both the focal individual [person, employee or worker] and his environment, i.e. P-E or Person-Environment Fit. The major proponents of this model are (Cooper and Marshall, 1978 as cited in Ronke, 1990). Within this paradigm, both external and internal causative factors are referred to as stressors, and the resulting state of the individual-poor physical health, job dissatisfaction, turn-over as stress. Within the P-E model, therefore, stress is seen as a response variable.

Environmental pressure or stressors impinge on the individual interacting with his personal characteristics to elicit a stress reaction. When the individual is distressed, he either adopt some methods of coping with the stress or become exposed to long term adverse effect, mental and physical illness; job dissatisfaction. The P-E framework explains employees (workers) stress using the principal sources of employee stress earlier discussed, which the Person-environment P-E fit is. French, et al (1974) saw stress and the resulting strain as a product of the interaction between the individual and the potential sources of stress in the environment. According to them, occupational stress is primarily a result of inadequate person-environment fit. One kind of fit is the extent to which the individual's skills and abilities match the demands and requirements of the job. The second fit is the extent to which the job environment provides support to meet the individual's needs. The resulting stress and stressors are major contributors to psychological and physical strain.

Primary Causes of Organizational Stress

According to Collien (2009). There are many reasons that causes stress at different workplace, stress can result from job-related factors, such as task overload conflict with our achievement goals, inability to do the task that assigned because of lack of preparations or experience.

Organizational Factors: The increase in organizational growth cause stress among employees, and the sources of stress to employees include over work,



Muhammad, A. H. and Muhammad S. Y. underemployment, time pressure, deadlines and excessive decision making. Tehrani, (2002) opined that stress is caused by unsympathetic organizational culture, poor communication between managers and employees, lack of involvement in decision making, bullying, and harassment, continual or sudden change insufficient resources, conflicting priorities and lack of challenges. Some other factors include:

Discrimination in pay/salary structure, Strict rules and regulations, Ineffective communication, Peer pressure, Goals conflict/goals ambiguity, More of centralized and formal organization structure, Less promotional opportunities, Lack of employee participation in decision-making, Excessive control over the employees by the managers, Harassment in the work place

Job Concern Factor: Stress may arise from role ambiguity, role conflict and responsibility. Role ambiguity occurs where an executive is not clear about the work objective associated with role, co-worker's expectations of the work role, the scope and responsibilities of the job. Role ambiguity may lead to lower job satisfaction, high-job related tension, greater futility and lower self-confidence. While role conflict exists when executive (employee) is caught between two groups of people, usually superiors who demand different kinds of behavior, or prescribe different kinds of functions for the same job. It has been discovered that man who experienced more role conflict had lower job satisfaction and higher-job related tension.

A good relationship between an executive [employee] and the boss, colleagues and subordinates strengthen the health of employers and that of the organization. While poor relationship characterized by mistrust of individual which is associated with high role ambiguity, which in turn leads to low job satisfaction and feeling of job related threat to the executive's [employee's] well-being.

Career Development Factors: Two major classes of stressors have been identified with this source. These are lack of job security, fear of redundancy, obsolescence or early retirement among few, and status incongruity, under promotion or over promotion, frustration at having reached

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one's career ceiling or "bar" etc. For the young energetic and dynamic employee, job security may be more assured than for the middle aged executive [employee] who is less dynamic and whose opportunity for changing jobs become impossible. Because he/she may face difficulties in mastering the new job, or unable to easily switch professions, due to age related issues and stiff competition with the fresh better qualified energetic young employee. Status incongruity or mismatch of employee ability and experience with his advancement has been reported to be a prominent source of employee stress (Ronke, 1990).

Employee stress also consists of variables outside the organization [working place]. These include family problems, life crises, financial difficulties, conflicting organizational and family demands. Which are known to create pressure on the employee and such pressure leads to maladjustment on the job. According to Ronke (1990), other sources of stress to Nigerian employees include road congestion, incessant power failure, lack of water supply etc. We may well add bad roads as well as harsh weather conditions in places like the North East and so on. The causes of stress affect the individual employee's well-being and simultaneously affect his performance in the organization in which he works as well as the nation at large. Individual who is experiencing a high level of stress may develop high blood pressure, ulcer, irritability, difficulty in making routine decisions, loss of appetite, accident-proneness and the likes. These can be subsumed under three categories: Physiological symptoms, Psychological symptoms and Behavioural symptoms (Cooper and Quick 2017)

1. Physiological symptoms: Traditionally, studies of physiological responses to stress have focused on the functioning of neuro-endocrine system and measure of cardiovascular health (Jones & Bright, 2001 as cited in Cope, 2003). The changes which accompany the experience of stress have different immediate and long-term consequences. The concept of "disease adaptation" which contrasted the short-term adaptability of the neuro-endocrine stress



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response, with the longer term relationship to pathogenesis (Cope, 2003). The physiological symptoms of stress could create changes in metabolism, increase heart and breathing rates, increase blood pressure, bring on headaches, and induce heart attack, muscular tension, among few.

2. Psychological

Symptoms:

Psychological reactions to stress begin with initial shock and disbelief followed by defensive reaction, denial and ultimately acceptance. Strain reaction may be temporary or long term, mild or severe depending on the longevity of the causes, how strong they are and the strength of the individual's ability to recover and cope (Cope, 2003). Stress can cause dissatisfaction. Job-related stress can cause job-dissatisfaction, which, in fact, is the simplest and most obvious psychological symptoms are tension, anxiety, irritability, boredom and procrastination, depression, discouragement, and lack of ability to concentrate or make decisions. Employees are placed in jobs that make multiple and conflicting demands or lack of clarity and responsibilities, both stress and dissatisfaction may increase. Similarly, the less control people have over the pace of their work, the greater the stress and dissatisfaction. Jobs that provide a low level of variety, significance, autonomy, feedback and identity to incumbents create stress and reduce satisfaction and involvement in the job.

3. **Behavioural Symptoms:** A number of physical symptoms of stress have been identified which commonly occur prior to the onset of serious-related illness. These include lack of appetite, insomnia, nervous twitches, headaches, high blood pressure, nail biting and indigestion. It is important to deal effectively with the stressors when minor physical manifestations of stress occur in order to prevent an escalation in physiological strain symptoms (Ronke, 1990). Behaviour-related stress symptoms include changes in productivity, absences and turn-over, as well as changes in

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eating habits, increase smoking or consumption of alcohol, rapid speech, fidgeting and sleep disorders. When an organization's employee suffers stress, the results are likely to take one or more of the following symptoms (Akinade 2007).

- i. High level of sickness and absenteeism
- ii. Reduced productivity or performance and failure to meet targets
- iii. Increased accidents and more prone to errors at work
- iv. Cribbing, over-reacting, arguing, getting irritated easily, anxiety or increased number of internal conflicts between individuals
- v. Improper eating habits (over-eating or under-eating)
- vi. Excessive smoking and drinking
- vii. Sleeplessness and
- viii. Undesirably high rate of staff turn-over

Counselling Technique for Managing Stress

The following are the techniques used in managing stress Job related issues:

Focus on the problem: this is a coping strategy in which a person focuses on specific problem or issues that has arisen, looking for a way of changing the situation by changing one's behaviors in order to deal with the stressful situations.

According to Atkinson et al (2000) stated strategies for solving problems includes, defining the problems, generating alternative solutions, weighing the alternatives in terms of costs and benefits choosing among them and implementing the selected alternatives. These strategies can be directed inwards, where the individual can change a behavior of his/her self than changing the environment where he/she works.

Focus on Emotions: There are many ways to copy with our negative emotions, this involves directly modify or eliminate unpleasant emotions, by focusing on alleviating the emotions attached with the stressful situations, this counseling skill is used when the situation cannot be controlled. Atkinson et al (2000) have divided these strategies into behavioral strategies and cognitive strategies (Atkinson et al, 2000)



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Behavioral Techniques: this coping skills helps to control physiological responses to stressful situations which includes;

- (i) Relaxation training: relaxation training is a method of helping people with high level of anxiety and stress, which also serves as an important component of some behavioral treatment. This exercise helps people to tighten and then relax one's muscle at a time and also relaxing different group skeletal (voluntary) muscle to release the stressor.
- (ii) Mediation: this strategy helps people to relax both the mind and the body. These are the procedures for meditation, first, the sitting position, that is sitting comfortably on a cushion or chair, then gradually relaxing the body, starts breathing slowly, and concentrate on a sensation, such as inhaling and exhaling of breath or on an image or objects. In transcendental meditation, the person does not try to concentrate on anything but merely sits in a quiet environment and repeat mantra (i.e a song, prayer to achieve a state of restful alertness (Auerbach and Aramling, 20006).
- (iii) Bio- feedback: it is a strategy in which people learn voluntary control of stress linked with physiological responses, such as muscle tension, blood pressure, body temperature, and heart rate. This skill helps individuals receive information about the aspect their physiological condition and attempt to alter that conditions.
- (iv) Aerobic exercise: this is the physical fitness techniques for controlling stress, such as Jogging, Running, Walking, Biking, Swimming, Cycling, Skipping among few. Aerobic exercise lowers the heart rate, and blood pressure and in controlling stressful situations people who exercise hardly fall sick.

Cognitive strategies: This skill helps people to identify the kinds of stressful situation that produce their physiological or emotional symptoms and find a way to cope with the situations and these strategies include temporarily setting the problem aside, or avoiding the problem and reducing the threat by changing the meaning of the situations.

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Social support: This skill helps people to adjust emotionally and physically to a stressor, in seeking emotional support from friends, relatives, colleagues and family etc. this support is important for maintain good mental health, it also provided us with emotional sustenance, aid and information, where, when, how we may be in need. People with social support feel loved, cared and value by others and feel a sense of belonging to a larger social network.

Imperatives of Stress Management and Employee Counselling in Nigerian Public Service

The importance of stress management and employee counselling in Nigeria's Public Service cannot be over-emphasized. The ever increasing complexities in modern civilization and the accompanying stress in life, especially the life of employees in work places is not something which any reasonable organization can disregard given the increasing importance of the human resources in organizations.

In Nigeria, stress management and employee counselling in the public service has not been incorporated into the sector. In most public/civil service organizations or government organizations, very little is even known about this important responsibility of management. The private sector especially banks, most of them have units which are saddled with the responsibility of stress management, manned by experienced managers or professional counselors. (Cope 2003)

Employee counselling trend is still at its infancy stage in Nigeria Public Service. Only few government agencies have counselling units in Nigeria. These agencies include institutions like the Universities, federal medical centers and few others. Stress management and counselling at most in our various ministries are done at the peer group level. Few supervisors tend to win the trust of their subordinate employees and where they even did, most of them are not trained stress management experts.

Stress in workers has been known to result to lack of patriotism, corruption and low productivity or performance among others, and all these have tended to stagnate the country's overall progress. Therefore, the need for employee counseling programmes



Muhammad, A. H. and Muhammad S. Y. have become a necessity in the Nigerian Public Service in order to create conducive working environment for workers, and counselling becomes a key factor for improved work place productivity and well-being of individual employee (Ajila and Adetayo 2003).

Conclusion

Nigerian employees with regards to stress management in the work place can be universal, but Nigerian employees are battling with other stressors that are actually caused by our under-develop nature which manifest in a myriad of ways such as incessant power failure, bad roads, traffic congestions, lack of portable water, environmental hazards, insecurity, officiousness, low wage package among few. Employee counselling can go a long way in helping public servants to have a better control over their lives, take their decisions wisely and better charge of their responsibilities, reduce the level of stress and anxiety. Employee counselling may also help government ministries/ departments and parastatals when the employees know that their organization cares for them and that will build a sense of commitment in them, and can help improve significantly to modify the behaviour of the employees, more so reinforce the desired behavior and improve/increase the employee's productivity and performance which is the ultimate goal of all organizations whether private or public.

Recommendations

Base on the discussion of stress management and employee counseling: it is imperative to the Nigerian public services the following recommendations are listed for effective employee counseling on stress management.

1. Nigerian government should encourage the establishment of stress management and employee counselling departments in all government ministries/ departments at the federal, state and local government levels, and parastatals.
2. Government should emphasize the techniques of job enrichment, employee motivation feedback and appropriate reward for excellence.
3. Too much emphasis on paper qualification should be removed and

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experienced employees maintained by allowing them to advance their skills whenever the need arises or new ways of doing the job by use of new technology is introduced.

4. Recreational facilities should be provided as well as encourage employees to join fitness clubs.
5. Ministries, departments and agencies of government as well as parastatals across the country should have clinics in order to maintain the health of the employee which is both the responsibility of the employee and the organization. It is in the best interest of both parties, if reasonable steps are taken to prevent or minimize employee stress.
6. Basic infrastructure such as good roads, stable power, regular and accessible sources of water etc. should be provided as lack of these things affect workers in so many ways and often make life miserable for them.
7. A fear free environment is key to employee performance. Therefore, security issues should be handled with utmost seriousness especially in areas experiencing insurgency and kidnappings for ransoms.
8. These recommendations should apply in the public sector as it will go a long way in improving performance of employees by reducing too much absenteeism, petty hawking, corruption, pilfering, violence in the work place etc.

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