Correlating stress and interaction: A case of Egerton university support staff in Kenya

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Abstract

Determining the effects of stress on the quality of interaction among the non-teaching staff of Egerton University Njoro Campus was the purpose of this study. 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 stress negatively affects the process of interaction among the non-academic staff. 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: Association, stress, quality of interaction, support Staff.

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. No study has been done to determine 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress is an interaction between individuals and the source of demand (stressor) within their environment (Bonita, 1995). An individual is in this state because of a discrepancy between these demands and his or her own abilities. At a personal level, stress can be related to depression, anxiety, general mental distress and symptoms such as heart diseases, ulcers and chronic pain (Sayter et al., 1989). A poor fit between person and environment can also occur if the person's motives are not satisfied by relevant supplies in the environment (Corsin, 1984). According to Goetsch and Fuller (1995), definitions of stress fall into three categories: Stress can be defined as a stimulus, a response or an interaction between an organism and its environment. This classification corresponds very closely to three models of stress (physiological, engineering and transactional models) identified by Cox (1978).

The physiological model is primarily concerned with what happens within the person. The impetus for this view of stress was Selye's (1956) definition that stress is a response by the body to demand the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it.

Selye's original observations were made when he was a medical student and noticed a general malaise or syndrome associated with 'being ill' regardless of the particular illness. The syndrome was characterised by: a loss of appetite, an associated loss of weight and strength, loss of ambition and a typical facial expression associated with illness. The engineering model sees external stress as giving rise to a stress reaction or strain in the individual, so the stress is located in the stimulus characteristics of the environment.

Stress is what happens to a person (not what happens to a person). The concept is derived from Hook's law of elasticity in physics, which deals with how loads (stress) produce deformation in metals. Up to a point, stress is inevitable and can be tolerated; indeed, moderate levels may even be beneficial, what Selye (1956) called Eustress. Indeed, the complete absence of stress could be positively detrimental. Stress helps to keep us alert, providing us with some of the energy required to maintain an interest in our environment, explore it and adapt to it; in these respects, stress is similar to motivation and emotion. However, when stress becomes intolerable (when we are stretched beyond the limits of our elasticity), it becomes positively harmful. According to Cox (1978), most people are stressed in their places of work, hence poor working relationships. These sentiments concur with the findings of this study.

The transactional model represents a kind of blend of the first two models and sees stress as arising from an interaction between people and their environment, in particular when there is an imbalance between the person's perception of the demand being made of them by the situation and their ability to meet the demand, and when failure to cope is important. It is the person's perception of this mismatch between demand and ability which causes stress; the model allows for important individual differences in what produces stress and how much stress is experienced; people may also differ in terms of characteristic physiological responses to stress. For instance, some will typically have migraine headaches, others break out in a rash, and others have stomach pains and so on.

In summary, the physiological model is primarily concerned with the question: How do we react (physiologically) to stress? Or what are the effects of stress? That is stress as a response. The engineering model is concerned with the question: 'What causes stress?' That is, stress is a stimulus. The transactional model is concerned with both these questions plus the question, 'How do we cope with stress?' That is, stress is an interaction between an organism and its environment.

Prevention, management and Coping with Stress
Sauter et al. (1997) observed that there is no standardised approach or simple manual that exists for developing a stress development programme. Stress prevention strategies are influenced by several factors such as; how big, and complex an organisation is, and complexity of the organisation, available resources and especially the unique types of stress problems faced by an organisation. It is impossible to prescribe an instant for preventing stress at work; Borthwick (1996) stressed that the key to managing work-related stress is prevention; thus, he suggested three major steps that can be followed and adopted in any organisation. These steps are as follows:

The first step is that of identification of the problem. The best way to approach the suspected source of the problem within an organisation will depend on its size and how equipped. There should be group discussions among managers, worker representatives and employees, which can provide rich sources of information. Data collected from these discussion groups should be analysed to answer questions about the location of stress problems, job conditions that may be responsible for stress and any other indirect sources of stress like external influence and interpersonal conflicts.

Once the source of stress at work has been identified and the scope of the problem is understood, then a strategy should be designed and implemented as an intervention in small organisations; the informal discussion groups used in step one can be used to create useful ideas for stress prevention. However, in large organisations, a more formal process may be needed and even include consultation with outside experts. At this stage, the recommendations for the prevention of stress will be based on the analysis of information in step one.

Monitoring and Evaluation are necessary to determine whether the intervention is producing desired effects and whether changes in direction are needed. Evaluation should focus on the same type of information, problem identification phase's intervention, and employees giving their views about the intervention, including information from employees about working conditions, levels of perceived stress, health problems and satisfaction. Bond (1997) states that prevention should be a continuous process that uses evaluation data to redirect the intervention strategies. Elisburg (1995) indicated that any organisation should implement a specific program and assign individuals specific roles and responsibilities.

Further, a consultative approach should be employed in decisions making. Employees and organisation managers should work towards harmonisation of workload and working hours to avoid stress. A potentially stressful event is greatly influenced by how one appraises or copes with it. What is stressful for one person may not be for another. Although the basic physiological responses to a stressor may be common to everyone, Colman (1997) states that people generally appraise a setting and make judgements on how threatening it is. Unfavourable coping can affect health (Corsin, 1984). Burron (1988) indicates that to manage stress, an individual needs inner resources of hardness and strength of character as well as confidence, faith and a positive outlook. He states that to avoid stress, one needs to possess qualities of discretion, maturity, prudence, insight and wisdom.

The body's reaction to stress affects health. Physical diseases and psychological disorders are more likely to occur in people experiencing significant stress. Adjustive resources are important factors in stress reduction and management (Fuster, 1988). Individuals who are undergoing stress should be counselled. The counselling process can use the following techniques:
1. Behavioural therapy
2. Rational emotive therapy

Omulema (2000) in Mumiukha (2003) defines behaviour modification as the application of basic research and theory from experimental psychology to influence behaviour for the purposes of resolving personal and social problems and enhancing human functioning. Behaviour therapy is the shaping of behaviour through the manipulation of reinforcement to obtain the desired behaviour (Wolman, 1989). Behaviour therapy's view is that a person is a producer and the product of his or her environment and that personality can be learnt and unlearned. The counselling techniques and procedures used are:

1. Systematic desensitisation

A person is trained to relax muscles beyond the point of normal tonus and anxiety-evoking situations. This is a behaviour therapy technique that involves deep muscle relaxation to inhibit the effect of anxiety-evoking stimuli (Wolman, 1989). The weakest situation has presented the imagination of a fully relaxed individual repeatedly until it no longer evokes anxiety. Stronger situations are then progressively introduced. The basic assumption here is that an anxiety response is learned or conditional and can be inhibited by substituting an activity that is antagonistic to it (Omulema, 2000). This technique is primarily used for anxiety and avoidance reactions.

2. Relaxation training

Relaxation training has become increasingly popular as a method of teaching people to cope with the stresses of daily living (Omulema, 2000). Deep and regular breathing is associated with producing relaxation. A good example of a relaxation procedure is Jacobson's method of progressive relaxation. This is a technique developed by E. Jacobson in the 1930s, and it emphasises teaching an individual how to relax in the belief that muscular relaxation and lack of tension will promote the decrease of psychological distress and tension (Corsins, 1984). An individual starting with the easiest muscle to control, learns to relax the whole body. Jacobson taught patients to go systematically through the body from the toes, tensing muscle groups and then relaxing them. Concentrating on the sensations produced by relaxation and then learning to become progressively relaxed (Corsin 1984).

3. Assertion Training

A technique of anxiety habits of response to interpersonal situations is overcome by encouraging an individual to express other spontaneously felt emotions in the actual situation (Wolman, 1989). People must master important social skills at each developmental stage. Adults must learn how to effectively interact with mates, peers and superiors (Corsin, 1984). Individuals without social skills experience interpersonal difficulties more often. Assertion training can be vital for people who cannot express anger or irritation, have difficulty saying no, those who are overly polite and allow others to take advantage of them, those finding difficulty in expressing love and other positive responses and those feeling that they are not entitled to express their thoughts, beliefs and feelings.

On stress management, family medical (1997) gives the following resources and activities which are useful in stress management:

1. Yoga and meditation – through these exercises, an individual seeks to achieve a state of passive alertness that transcends the everyday level of thought and distraction.
2. Massage – The unconscious reaction to reach out and touch a painful part of the body constitutes the basics of massage. Rubbing parts of the body and applying oils lessens pain and tension. It affects the whole body through rhythmically applied pressure.
3. Nutrition – Food is the fuel put in the body in order for it to survive. Food management is important in checking weight, as well as improving the ability to relax and cope with stress. A correct diet will encourage fitness and energy, nourish nerves and muscles, improve circulation and breathing and support the immune system.
4. Breathing – This is of great value in relaxation. Investigating the breathing pattern and learning to control it is an important step in learning to control stress.
5. Exercise – This creates the process that turns food into energy. Regular exercise improves sleep, reduces headaches, and creates a feeling of well-being and increases concentration and stamina. Exercising can be in the form of aerobics, walking and running.

On the other hand, renowned scholars like Edworthy (2000) advised the keeping of a stress diary, becoming change-skilled, adopting a healthy lifestyle, adopting the right attitude, learning to relax, learning correct breathing and employing values and goal planning as ways of managing stress. Once an individual masters the art of stress management, he or she is able to function effectively even under pressure, improve the quality of his or her life and avoid the ill health associated with high levels of stress.

Cohen & Lazarus (1979) have classified all the coping strategies that a person might use into five general categories. First is the direct action response, in which the individual tries to directly change or manipulate their relationship to a stressful situation, such as escaping from or removing it. Second is information seeking, in which the individual tries to understand the situation better and analyse possible future events that are related to the stressor. The third is inhibition of action involving doing nothing in an event. Fourth is intrapsychic or palliative coping, enabling an individual to accommodate the event by re-appraising the situation or by altering the internal environment through drugs, alcohol, relaxation or meditation. Finally, one may turn to others for help and emotional support. This involves mobilising a social support network.

One could employ a wide variety of coping strategies to manage simple stress, or at different points in time (Colman, 1997) there are three strategies for treating stress symptoms which are the direct use of behaviour therapy, medication and physical (Sauna, massaging, hot tub, Jacuzzi). Changing the person by use of biofeedback involves using medical technology to help individuals to monitor and eventually control physiological processes and also relaxation training by use of techniques designed to help people relax and cope, for example, yoga. Interpersonal strategies involving team building, sensitivity training and assertiveness training are all designed to help people cope with interpersonal difficulties (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979).

Melgosa (2001) gives different methods of coping with stress which include: the use of a sauna, involving a steam bath that leads to the elimination of waste substances through the skin, enabling better body organs functioning, hydrotherapy where an individual takes a bath in Luke-warm water thus leading to muscular relaxation; thalassotherapy involving baths in seawater and this increases appetite, stimulates metabolism and help in better functioning of secretion glands; medicinal plants such as stimulant plants (spearmint, savoury) that lead to relaxation; those that help in balancing the nervous system (Hawthorn, Valerian Linden); and meditation, religious responses and prayer are also considered therapeutic.

Mulligan (1998) states that learning skills for managing stress will enable an individual to function more effectively and in making changes in life that lead to more stimulation, fulfilment and contentment. There are four ways through which stress can be reduced (Collins, 1988). The four ways include the first biological control of stress, which involves medical treatment of persons experiencing extreme stress. Psychiatric medicines thus only lessen symptoms rather than cure. Renowned scholars like Beech et al. (1982) introduced the biofeedback technique that involves learning to gain control over some physiological processes. Secondly, an environmental intervention which involves changing anxiety and worry-producing circumstances such as an individual's lifestyle relationships, place of residence or career direction. Thirdly, a cognitive intervention involves correcting cognitive distortions that lead to stress. Fourthly, the behavioural intervention involves the use of behaviour therapy.

There are several stress theories which have been developed. It was assumed that once we know the causes of stress, we develop effective programmes for controlling or reducing that stress and thereby eliminate its dangerous side effects. Despite this, there is no one generally accepted theory (Land, 1989). For this study, Rational Emotive Therapy is more appropriate. Rational Emotive Therapy is a form of cognitive behaviour therapy that emphasises a philosophical approach to the prevention and treatment of emotional disturbances (Wolman, 1989). It stresses that thinking, judging, and behaviour interact significantly and have a reciprocal cause and effect relationship. Its basic hypothesis is that our emotions stem from our beliefs, evaluations,

interpretations and reactions to life situations (Corsin, 1984). Rational–emotive therapy helps an individual minimise current self-defeating behaviour by tools to identify and dispute irrational beliefs that have been acquired are taught. The focus is on working with thinking and acting rather than expressing feelings. Logic, reason, confrontation, exhortation teaching, prescription, example, role-playing and behaviour assignments are some of the techniques employed. The therapist seeks to re-educate the client to break down old patterns and establish new ones (Corsin, 1984).

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive survey and aimed at determining the effects of stress on the quality of interaction among the non-teaching staff of Egerton University Njoro Campus. The study was conducted at the Njoro campus of Egerton University. The non-teaching staff comprising of 1570 people were the target for this study. The actual population included in the sampling frame was 769 employees in the I-IV and A-F cadres. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select the respondents. 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 reliability. 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 $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study's objective aimed to find out whether stress has any influence on the way employees interact with each other. Specifically, the question intended to establish whether stress has anything to do with personality type adopted by individual employees, which is crucial in determining the level at which the individual interacts and socialises with others. Results indicate that 43.6 % of the respondents are never affected by stress in their interaction process. A small percentage (8.71%) are always affected, while the rest (47.7%) are either often or occasionally affected. Table 1 below illustrates the results. This means that a greater percentage (56.41%) indicated that stress, either occasionally, often, or always affected their process of interaction with other members of staff.

Table 1: Effects of stress on the process of interaction among the non-academic staff

Stress variables	Per cent Response	
	Always	**Never**
Ignored at work	2.4	51.8
Come late to work	2.4	33.7
Not tempted	6.0	33.7
Valued at work by colleagues	34.9	12.0
My voice goes enough	9.6	38.6
A problem in communicating with colleagues	1.2	72.3
No confidence at work	00	86.7
Satisfied with the level of achievement	27	37.3
Go for vocation	1.2	21.7
Do not like greeting friends	2.4	81.9

Average		8.71%	43.6%

This is in agreement with Melgosa (2001), but it contradicts Edworthy (2000), who believes that stress does not affect the way people interact.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study was to determine the effects of stress on the quality of interaction among the non-teaching staff of Egerton University Njoro Campus. The study established that stress negatively affects the process of interaction among the non-academic staff of Egerton University. When the employees are stressed like they are occasionally, they don't interact well with colleagues. If the non-academic staff of Egerton University are to be effective and fruitful in their Job assignments, then it requires concerted efforts from all the stakeholders in the University.

Recommendation: In view of this, the researcher recommended that the non-teaching staff should be sensitised on the consequences of stress and the indicators of stress. This can be achieved through workshops and seminars. Similarly, a junior common room should be established to enable the non-teaching staff to socialise and interact with each other outside office hours.

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