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## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AS MEDIATOR BETWEEN CONFLICT-HANDLING BEHAVIOUR AND WORKPLACE COMMITMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCHERS IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*No organization can perform maximally except each employee is committed to its growth. However, employees' conflict-handling styles always challenge their level of productivity. This study assessed the mediating effects of communication strategies on conflict-handling behavior and workplace commitment of agricultural researchers in selected institutions in Southwest Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 113 agricultural researchers for the study. Primary data were obtained on employees' conflict-handling communication strategies and workplace commitment using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, and hierarchical regression analysis. Results indicate that 54.9% of the respondents were male, 61.1% were married with an average age of 44 years and 9 years of experience. Most (59.3%) of the respondents noted that they always view conflict from both positive and negative sides while 53.1% reported that conflict related issues were discussed with mutually beneficial and lasting solutions reached. 45.1% of the respondents always avoid the discussion of issues which may engender conflict in the workplace. 55.8% of the researchers reiterated they work harmoniously well with other researchers who consider their feeling as a topmost priority. The hierarchical regression analysis revealed a significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) relationship between Conflict handling behaviour and workplace commitment ( $\beta = 4.28$ ). Also, communication strategies was significantly related ( $b = .04, p > .05$ ) to workplace commitment. It is concluded that conflict handling behaviour is a predictor of workplace commitment with communication strategies serving as a mediating variable. The study recommends that constant capacity building workshops on Conflict Handling Behaviour and communication strategies in the workplace should be organized for the researchers.*

**Keywords:** Agricultural researchers, conflict-handling behaviour, communication strategy, workplace commitment

DOI:

### INTRODUCTION

Employees in any workplace have different personality traits, but in spite of these dif-

ferences, they need to coexist. In order to ensure workplace commitment and improve job performance, employees need to contin-

ually interact together at work. However, studies have established that individual competition and social dominance does not always allow for this seamless flow of interactions among employees (Gabriel, 2011). As a result, conflict arises due to perceived threats to interests, needs and concerns. To this extent, conflicts between employees will likely occur anytime there is a break in the communication process, ineffective communication strategies or a perceived threat to needs. According to Pruitt, *et al.*, (2004) lack of effective communication and inappropriate communication strategies between groups, individual employees, or a situation that is poorly handled (due to miscommunication) are usually the root cause of conflicts.

Given credence to the foregoing, lucid communication is imperative for the proper functioning of an organization. Wrench and Carter (2012) iterates that when a group of employees works interdependently within a relatively structured and organized system, achieving organizational goals is inevitable. Communication within an organization facilitates the free flow of information and it has been referred to as the life of every organization (Oose *et al.*, 2021). Effective communication within an organization is considered fundamental for the working of the organizations and its benefits enable the human resources and other units to cooperate with each other. It reduces conflicts, makes the implementation of roles manageable and employees are able to communicate with each and, share information and knowledge (Wrench and Carter, 2012). Therefore, in order to achieve effective communication within the organization, the communication strategy adopted is apt.

In addition, Anderton and Carter (2011) opines that, in determining the communication strategy, mutual trust between the communicator and the receiver is required and if there is no mutual trust, the communication will not succeed; therefore the absence of trust impedes communication flow. In order to avoid and resolve conflict within the organization, a communication strategy is necessary for planning and managing the communication process. However, to achieve this, Effendy (2006) noted that the strategy does not only serve as a road map showing the direction, it must also show the operational tactic that should be carried out. In other words, the approach may differ from time to time depending on the circumstances. The success of effective communication is determined by the choice and potency of the communication strategy.

Communication strategy is a potent tool for the realization of communication goals. Communication sustainability and effective conflict management in a diverse workplace depend mostly on the ability of the employer to use appropriate communication skills to manage employees' diversity (Gitonga, *et al.*, 2016). However, top-level management faces challenges in formulating strategies to communicate effectively with a diverse workforce (Alexander *et al.*, 2015). Employers and employees in a workplace bring in some degree of experience, perceptions, and skills, which could strengthen organization's communication framework and boost the level of employee commitment to enhance productivity (Asefa and Kerga, 2018). Therefore, to assist employees in maintaining a conflict-free system, individual employees need to invest effort and time in improving and redefining the communication strategies in their respective organizations (Ian and Mahmud, 2018).

Globally, there seems to be a commitment crisis particularly in public organizations and this have over the years affected workplace commitments. Addae, *et al.*, (2006) noted that in today's competitive and dynamic world, every organization is facing new challenges regarding creating a committed workforce, conflict issues, and organizational performance. In diverse workplace environments, no organization can perform at the maximum level, unless employees are committed to the objectives of the organization (Nabukeera, 2015). Hence, it is expedient to assess how drivers such as conflict-handling behaviour and communication strategies influence employees' commitments in the workplace. Demovsek (2008) and Dessler (2011) established that committed employees develop a bond with the organization and that creates better organizational performance. The employees' emotional connection to their work, relationships with other employees and with the organization enhance their commitment in order to serve the organization better. Successful organizations depend on the high commitment of their employees to meet their objectives. It is important to examine whether or not conflict-handling behaviour is a predictor to achieve the high commitment of agricultural researcher in Nigeria and if communication strategies is a mediator.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Thomas-Kilman Conflict Model (TKI)*

Thomas-Kilman Conflict theory believes that 'there are particular modes of dealing with conflict and each mode is suited to different kinds of conflict' (Pablo, 2023). Going by the assertion above, it becomes expedient that conflict parties and handlers to apply the appropriate conflict resolution

mode to particular conflicts depending on the nature, issues, dynamics and context of the conflict.

The TKI modes consist of five main elements:

**Competition Mode:** This is most perceived in parties which are in asymmetric kind of conflict. They exploit the power imbalance to intimidate the opponent. They maximize time, power and affluence relations to gain upper hand in conflicts. They think of outcomes only on their own terms. This approach produces win-lose outcomes.

**Collaborative Mode:** This is a joint problem-solving approach in which the two parties come together to find a mutually-beneficial solution to their conflict. Each party has a say in the resolution of the conflict. A win-win outcome is eventually achieved.

**Compromising Mode:** This is a situation where a party in the conflict decides to make compromises just to escape the grim realities of the conflict or to protect the existing relationship. This conflict management mode ends up abrading the mutuality of the solution. The burden weighs too much on one party and at the end, a win-lose outcome is achieved. It affords a partial satisfaction to the disputants. This conflict management mode is often deployed in place of litigation as the cost runs much higher than those of the compromises made. According to Pablo (2023), in disputes where everyone is in a position to give up something, a compromising style can be effective. It is particularly useful when everyone wants the same thing and it can be divided equally. This could be applied in land disputes or access to a type of service or resource.

**Accommodating Mode:** This mode is very much likened to the compromising mode. It suggests a one-sided conflict management plan in which only one party decides to accommodate all the wishes of the opposing party. Unarguably, one party is satisfied at the expense of the other. A win-lose outcome is achieved. There is the possibility of sewing another seed of conflict if not carefully handled.

**Avoidance Mode:** In this mode, a party deliberately avoids being in conflict with the other for personal reasons. This party keeps piling up emotions rather than addressing the issues in conflict. Most of the time, the other party is unaware of a brewing conflict. This is a very dangerous approach to conflict management as it often develops into intra-personal conflict and this may cause either psychological implosion or explosion. It produces a lose-win outcome.

Benoniel (2023) observes that ‘a critical competency for today’s working professionals is to understand that we each have our own way of dealing with conflict.’ It was opined. Though conflict is a normal and natural part of any workplace, it can lead to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and mental health issues. At the same time, conflict can be a motivator that generates new ideas and innovations as well as leads to increased flexibility and a better understanding of working relationships. However, conflict needs to be effectively managed in order to contribute to the success of organizations. Going by Benoniel (2023) opinion, it is incumbent on workplace staff and management to be well-schooled in various conflict-handling styles to be able to prevent, mitigate and transform conflicts in workplaces to enhance productivity.

Therefore, the study sought to investigate communication strategies as mediator between conflict-handling behaviour and workplace commitment through the following specific objectives which are to:

1. describe respondents’ demographic characteristics in the study area;
2. assess respondents’ conflict-handling behaviour;
3. identify communication strategies adopted by the respondents and
4. determine respondents’ workplace commitment in the study area.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Oyo State, Southwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria with the coordinate of 8.1570°N and 3.01470°E. A simple random sampling procedure was used to select one hundred and thirteen (113) Agricultural Researchers from one (1) College of Agriculture and two (2) research institutes which are; the Federal College of Agriculture, Ibadan (FCA) and two research institutes Cocoa Research Institutes of Nigeria (CRIN) and Institute for Agricultural Research Ibadan - IAR&T) from where the sample frame of the respondents from the three institutes were generated. This gave a total of 113 agricultural researchers (33 from FCA, 35 from CRIN and 45 from IITA). The overall response rate achieved was 77.39% (n=113). Because over 75.0% response rate was achieved therefore, the non-response error is not a threat to the external validity of the study findings (Lindner and Wingenbach 2002).

### Measurement of variables

Conflict-handling Behaviour (Ch-B): Respondents’ Conflict handling Behaviour was measured by adapting a 10-item scale (Patricia, 2021). The items were reworded to reflect conflict handling behaviour. Sample

of the words are; *In conflict, I say little and leave as soon as possible, I avoid hard feeling by keeping conflict to myself, I discuss issues with others and find solution that meet everyone's needs*, etc. internal consistency reliability (Cronbach) for the scale was 0.81.

**Communication Strategies:** Eight items relating to communication strategies and languages were adapted from the works of Nakatani (2006) to assess communication strategies of agriculture researchers. Sample items are; *avoid discussing issues which may engender conflict, refraining from talking about the issue with the disputant in question, using a native language word/phrase while talking with the disputant* e.t.c (Cronbach alpha = 0.84). Responses on all the scale items were ordered on a four-point rating scale of always (4), occasionally (3), sometimes (3) and rarely (1)

**Workplace Commitment:** Eight items were adapted from the survey of organization commitment scale (Alexandre *et al.*, 2015) to assess the construct. Sample of statements used are; *I am not committed to work when conflict are not resolved, Win-win conflict approach make me go extra mile for the organization, I work harmoniously with others who consider the feeling of other who work with them, My organization inspires me to give my best among others*. Internal consistency reliability for the scale (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.72

Personal characteristics of the respondents such as age and work experience were measured at interval level, sex and marital status were measured at the nominal level, while academic qualification was measured at ordinal level.

### Data Analysis

The hierarchical regression analytical technique was employed for the mediational

analyses in this study. The two sets of mediational analyses used were hypotheses tests of mediating role of communication strategies on the CH-B and workplace commitment linkage as well as an alternate model of CH-B to mediate the relation between communication strategies and workplace commitment. To test for mediation, the four-step procedure outlined by Preacher and Leonardelli (2001) was used. First, the predictor should significantly relate to the mediator. Secondly, there should be a significant relationship between the predictor and criterion in the absence of the mediator. Thirdly, the mediator should have a significant relationship with the criterion. Finally, the magnitude of relationship between predictor and criterion should become non-significant or reduced upon the inclusion of mediator to the model to provide evidence for full or partial mediation. This study is correctional in design, objectives were measured using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages and Weighted Mean Score (WMS). Significant differences was determined at  $P \leq 0.05$ .

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Respondents' Demographic Characteristics*

Results revealed that 75.1% of the respondents were between 31 and 50years with a mean age of 44years (Table 1). This connotes that researchers working in tertiary institutions and research institutes are in their middle age and are expected to be agile, active and productive. This finding is in agreement with the report of Oose *et al.* (2022) who posited that most researchers were between the ages of 31 and 61years are still active in service. More than half (54.9%) of the researchers were male, 61.1% were married, and 36.3% had Masters' degree. This further explains that there are more male researchers in tertiary and research in-

stitutions in Nigeria. The reason for this may be adduced to the priority for adult females to get married and start a family. These findings noted that the priority for adult women to get married, raise children and demands of domestic work could be a

hindrance for most of them to be gainfully employed. In addition, 76.1% of the respondents had less than 10 years' work experience (Table 1). This implies that most of the researchers had worked for about 10 years as agriculture researchers.

**Table 1: Researchers' Demographic Characteristics (n=113)**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Mean/sd
<b>Age (Years)</b>			
≤30	18	15.5	44.20(10.5)
31-40	35	30.9	
41-50	50	44.2	
51-60	10	9.0	
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	62	54.9	
Female	51	45.1	
<b>Marital status</b>			
Single	43	34.1	
Married	69	61.1	
Divorced	01	0.9	
<b>Academic qualification</b>			
NCE	24	21.2	
HND/BSc	28	24.8	
MSc	41	36.3	
MPhil	04	3.5	
PhD	16	14.2	
<b>Years of Experience</b>			8.53(7.30)
≤ 10	86	76.1	
11-20	16	14.1	
21 and above	11	9.8	

Source: Field Survey, 2021

#### **Conflict Handling Behaviour**

The most common conflict handling behaviour used by the respondents were keeping the communication line open ( $\bar{x}_w = 388.7$ ), discussing issues and finding solutions to meet identified needs ( $\bar{x}_w =$

326.5), seeing conflicts from both sides of negative and positive ( $\bar{x}_w = 323.2$ ), and seeing little and leaving as soon as possible ( $\bar{x}_w = 316.5$ ); (Table 2). This implies that agricultural researchers possess different personality traits and views on issues but despite

the differences in issues, they still coexist in order to carry out their duties and this can enhance their job commitments. Therefore, for good interaction at the workplace, they need to perceive conflict from each other's perspectives, discuss the issues that cause conflict and provide a lasting solution. The ability to walk away was also noted as a major conflict handling behaviour used by the

researchers (Table 2). The positive conflict-handling disposition exhibited by the researchers is in agreement with the works of Stewart (2000), Vilhelm (2003), and Gabriel (2011) that finding solutions and the ability to walk out of conflict-related issues is a measure for conflict-handling behaviour in the workplace.

**Table 2: Respondents' Conflict Handling Behaviour (n=113)**

Statements	ALW	OCY	SMT	RAY	WMS
In conflict, I say little and leave as soon as possible	51(45.1)	31(27.4)	30(26.5)	1(0.9)	316.5
I avoid hard feeling by keeping conflict to myself	45(39.8)	32(28.3)	30(26.5)	6(5.3)	277.9
I discuss issues with others and find solutions that meet everyone's needs	60(53.1)	26(23.0)	24(21.2)	3(2.7)	326.5
In conflict, I gathered much information and keep communication line opened	61(54.1)	21(18.6)	22(19.5)	9(8.0)	388.7
I see conflict as both positive and negative	67(59.3)	14(12.4)	23(20.4)	9(8.0)	323.2
Arguing my case and insisting on the advantages of my point	32(28.3)	22(19.5)	38(33.6)	21(18.6)	257.5
I find conflict exhilarating and enjoy the battle that usually follows	14(12.4)	26(23.0)	18(15.9)	55(48.7)	165.4
Negotiate and use a give-and-take approach to conflict	43(38.1)	35(31.0)	18(15.9)	17(15.0)	292.2
I prefer to compromise when solving conflict and move on	20(17.7)	34(30.1)	34(30.1)	25(22.1)	243.4
Trying to meet the wishes and demands of others	34(30.1)	39(34.5)	25(22.1)	15(13.3)	281.4

**Source: Field Survey, 2021**

Always (alw); Occasionally (ocy); Sometimes (smt), Rarely (ray), weighted mean score (wms)

**Communication Strategies**

Avoidance of conflict ( $\bar{x}_w = 303.3$ ), setting up a new speech plan ( $\bar{x}_w = 300.8$ ), making clarification ( $\bar{x}_w = 264.1$ ), and refraining from talking about the issue in the presence of the disputant ( $\bar{x}_w = 261.0$ ) were major communication strategies used by the respondents (Table 3). This implies that respondents were able to implement good communication strategies in the

workplace. The ability to avoid discussion that may engender conflict and set up a new speech plan when the original one fails is an indication that agricultural researchers exhibited good communication strategies. This result corroborates the reports of Metcalfe *et al.*, (2013), Tian *et al.*, (2018) and Zulkarnain *et al.*, (2018) that retrieval, avoidance, and achievement strategies are good ways to resolve conflict-related issues and realize workplace commitment.

**Table 3: Researchers' Communication Strategies (n=113)**

Statements	ALW	OCY	SMT	RAY	WMS
Avoid discussing issues which may engender conflict	51(45.1)	25(22.1)	27(23.9)	10(8.8)	303.3
Refraining from talking about the issue with the disputant in question	25(22.1)	34(30.1)	39(34.5)	15 (13.3)	261.0
Using a native language word/phrase while talking with the disputant	15(13.3)	19(16.8)	40(35.4)	39 (34.5)	208.9
Using a target language word which shares enough semantic features in common with a desired lexical item	23(20.4)	24(21.2)	38(33.6)	28 (24.8)	238.9
Describing/exemplifying the action instead of using the appropriate target language item	25(22.1)	32(28.3)	39(34.5)	17 (15.0)	257.3
Setting up a new speech plan when the original one fails	44(38.9)	35(31.0)	25(22.1)	9(8.0)	300.8
I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said.	29(25.7)	48(42.5)	25(22.1)	11(9.7)	264.1
Employing hesitation devices as fillers to gain time to think	33(29.2)	42(37.2)	22(19.5)	16 (14.2)	181.6

**Source: Field Survey, 2021**

standard deviation (sd); always (alw); occasionally (ocy); sometimes (smt), rarely (rarely), weighted mean score (wms)



**Workplace Commitment**

The respondents always work harmoniously well with other researchers who considers their feeling as a topmost priority ( $\bar{x}_w = 329.3$ ), are more efficient when conflict is settled amicably ( $\bar{x}_w = 324.7$ ) while the researchers noted a reasonable workplace environment ( $\bar{x}_w = 300.1$ ) which inspires them to give their best to the organization ( $\bar{x}_w = 288.3$ ) (Table 4). The findings imply that agricultural researchers were favorably

committed to their work. Contrary to expectation in conflict situations, the conflict-handling strategies adopted by researchers made them work together amicably, thereby enhancing their work commitment. It is therefore expected that a well-managed conflict enhances their commitment in the workplace. This is in line with the studies of Chau-Chiun (2005), and Ongori (2007) who reported that in organizations where conflict is not well handled, employees' workplace commitment is low.

**Table 4: Researchers Workplace Commitment (n=113)**

Statements	ALW	OCY	SMT	RAY	WMS
I am not committed to work when conflict are not resolved	15(13.3)	32(28.3)	31(27.4)	35(31.1)	224.0
Win-win conflict approach make me go extra mile for the organization	32(28.3)	31(32.7)	31(27.4)	13(11.5)	252.2
I work harmoniously with others who consider the feeling of others who work with them	63(55.8)	24(21.2)	22(19.5)	4(3.5)	329.3
Settled conflict that favours everybody makes me more effective	65(57.5)	20(17.7)	19(16.8)	9(8.0)	324.7
I don't think I want to work anywhere except this organization	25(22.1)	25(22.1)	28(24.8)	35(31.0)	235.3
The condition of my workplace is reasonable	44(39.0)	30(26.5)	34(30.1)	5(4.4)	300.1
I feel no loyalty towards the organization	13(11.5)	21(18.6)	26(23.0)	53(46.9)	194.7
My organization inspire me to give my best	40(35.4)	38(33.6)	17(15.0)	18(15.9)	288.3

**Source: Field Survey, 2021**

standard deviation (sd); always (alw); occasionally (ocy); sometimes (smt), rarely (rarely), weighted mean score (wms)

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***Mediating influence of Workplace Commitment***

In step 1, there existed a significant relationship between sex ( $b = 0.79$ ), marital status ( $b = 0.10$ ), years of work experience ( $b = 0.35$ ) and workplace commitment. This implies that researchers' sex category, marital status and number of years of work experience has effect on their workplace commitment (Table 5). It signifies that researchers who had spent longer years with the organization may have more workplace commitment compared to those who had spent less years. Therefore, the finding established a relationship between seniority and workplace commitment. This is in consonance with Dunham *et al.*, (1994) and Meyer and Allen (1997) who claimed that an employee is emotional attached to his organization when he has stayed for a considerably long time.

CH-B entered the model in step 2 and was significantly related to workplace commitment ( $b = 4.28$ ). In step 3, communication strategies were significantly related ( $b = .04$ ). The significant relationship between communication strategy and workplace commitment after controlling for CH-B fulfilled the third mediation condition. However, evidence of partial mediation was provided by the non-disappearance of a significance between CH-B ( $b = 4.28$ ) and workplace commitment when communica-

tion strategy was added to the model (Table 5). Thus, the fourth mediation requirement was met and this is in agreement with Preacher and Leonardelli (2001). This result implies that though conflict is common in any organization, it can influence researchers' morale, productivity and commitment to work. However, a well-managed conflict among employees will enhance their commitment to the organization (Ahmad and Marimah, 2013; Nik and Sharmin, 2011 and Havenga and Visagie, 2011).

Also, communication strategies mediate the relationship between CH-B and workplace commitment. The mediating role of communication strategies in the CH-B and Workplace Commitment linkage is supported by Ayub, Ma Commitment linkage is supported by Ayub, Manaf, and Hamzah (2014). This is expected because communication strategies assist employees to communicate effectively and meet core organizational goals. Organizational performance and researchers' commitment depend mostly on the ability of the unit heads to use appreciate communication skills to manage researchers' diversity, conflict and improve work commitment. Therefore, the result implies that the researchers' communication strategy is a veritable tool to resolve or avoid conflicts which consequently has a positive impact on the work commitment.

Table 5: Hierarchical regression analysis of CH-B and CS predicting Workplace Commitment

SN	Regression steps	Model I			Model II			Model III		
		B	t-values	Sig	b	t-values	sig	b	t-values	sig
<b>Step 1</b>										
1.	Age	-.07	-1.06	.28	.05	.87	.38	.03	.48	.62
2.	Sex	1.79	2.33	.002*	1.49	1.88	.06	1.19	1.61	.10
3.	Marital status	1.97	2.10	.03	2.10	2.22	.02**	1.42	1.59	.11
4.	Education status	-.32	.81	.41	.26	.67	.50	.45	1.21	.22
5.	Years of experience	.185	2.35	.002*	.18	2.33	.002*	.14	1.96	.55
<b>Step 11: Predictors</b>										
6.	CH-B				.13	1.50	.13	.33	4.28	.001*
<b>Step 111: Mediator</b>										
7.	CS							.14	.15	.04*
	R	.42			.44			.56		
	R <sup>2</sup>	.18			.20			.32		
	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.14			.15			.27		
	F	4.64*			4.29*			6.92*		
	Df	5/109			6/109			7/109		

5% = \*; 1% = \*\* n=113; Conflict Handling Behaviour (CHB); Communication Strategies (CS)

## CONCLUSION

There is an empirical evidence that Nigerian agricultural researchers exhibited a good conflict handling behaviour in the workplace. Therefore, conflict handling behaviour is a predictor of workplace commitment. In addition, effective use of communication strategies is a good mediator to ensuring workplace commitment by the researchers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that employees and management within the organization should pay close attention to conflict handling behaviour and communication strategies as well as institutional and/or individual drivers that could serve as predictors than can improve workplace commitments. In addition, on-the-job trainings and workshops on conflict handling behaviour and communication strategies should be organize for the researchers in order to enhance their workplace commitment.

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