

**THE ROLE OF COUNSELLING IN CHANGING EMPLOYEE
BEHAVIOUR: A CASESTUDY OF BULAWAYO PREMIER SERVICE
MEDICAL AID SOCIETY (PSMAS) IN ZIMBABWE.**

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Abstract

The research sought to assess the role of workplace counselling in changing employee behaviour. The research was carried in the form of a case study, in which a sample of 55 employees from a population of 120 employees was used. Stratified random sampling procedure was employed in selecting elements from 20 managers and 100 general workers respectively. Questionnaires and interviews were used in triangulation to collect data on the sample. After analyzing the collected data, it was found that employees have high respect for the role of workplace counselling arguing that it reduces rate of absenteeism, grievances, hearings and dismissals. It was also found that some employees feel that counselling is a waste of resources because it is used by managers as a way of suppression and torture of vibrant employees in the name of disciplinary counselling.

Key words

Bullying, Counselling, Workplace counselling, Employee, management, counselling role, and behaviour attributes

Related Literature

According to Brammer and Shostrom (1977), workplace counselling is a way of relating and responding to an employee or colleague so that he or she explores his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviour to reach a clear self-understanding. Cole (2003) purports that, co-workers, supervisors and managers counsel their own staff at the workplace. However, other special staff members such as the human resources managers and the training managers are obliged to provide counselling

to any staff member because of the uniqueness of their positions. Summerfield and Van Oudtshoorn (1995) views personnel and human resource managers as the ones who have workplace counselling skills integrated into their existing roles. This gives them the credibility to offer such services. There is also room for professional employee counsellors to set up and maintain therapeutic working alliances with the workers in an organisation (Carroll and Walton, 1999). Makinde (1983) further states that, workplace counselling is an integrative process between an employee who is vulnerable and requires assistance from a counsellor who is trained and educated to give such assistance. Employee counselling entails the provision of help and support to employees in a way that helps them to face and sail through the difficult times in life. At many points in time, in life or career, people come across problems either at work or in their personal lives. However, these problems influence and affect their performance thereby exacerbating the indiscipline levels of the individual. Therefore, According to Roberts (2001) counselling guides, consoles, advises, shares and helps in resolving employee problems whenever the need arises.

According to Roberts (2001), there are many elements which determine an individual's behaviour at the workplace. Managers and their subordinates are shaped by their own culture and by the organization's culture. These influences affect the way employees communicate and interact with one another, and with management. Communication helps to shape employee perceptions as well as to understand employee's perceptions. Different forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, must be used effectively and efficiently to ensure that each individual within a corporation's diverse team is within reach.

Behaviours of individuals depend on characteristics of the individuals. Makinde (2008) says that collective behaviour of individuals at an organisation forms its identity. Behaviour becomes the code of the social structure and accordingly, an environment is created for all members to adjust. Individuals take with them an attitude that affects both their personal as well as workplace environment. For example, if a person has a fight with their spouse outside of work, the consequent bad attitude can negatively affect their productivity throughout the day. Given this direct relationship between attitude and job performance, a company has to help its employees to experience positive attitudes. This can be achieved by various strategies. Organizations should know their employees well enough to apply the best methods that will achieve the greatest results possible for both the company and employees.

McLeod (2001) argues that, counselling in the workplace helps to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve mental health, lower levels of sickness and increase job satisfaction and commitment. Counselling provides an effective method for understanding behavioural discipline and offers a supportive

remedy. Moreover, counselling requires managers to identify employees who are not performing as effectively as they previously did.

Brammer and Shostrom (1977) postulates that, counselling reduces sickness level. They argue that stress and pressure are some of the biggest reasons for medium to long-term sickness in the workplace. Employing a counsellor to help deal with stress and pressure can help to cut sickness levels in the work place. This in turn leads to higher levels of efficiency and productivity. In addition, it increases and improves job satisfaction. When employees enjoy their job, they tend to perform better and more efficiently, which from a business owner's point of view is highly desirable. If employees can deal with behavioural issues, they are able to increase their job satisfaction and overall happiness, which will usually make for a much better worker (Brammer and Shostrom; 1977).

Carroll and Walton (1999), posits that stress, anxiety and pressure influence staff behaviour, thus, results in illnesses, depression and a decrease in job satisfaction. Offering formal counselling sessions to stressed employees helps them feel valued, and enables them to identify the causes of their problems. Counselling also helps to increase staff morale, boost confidence and self-esteem and improvements in productivity and efficiency. In addition, social betterment, personnel counselling, occupational mental health and help of management reduces ill behaviourism. This helps employees to increase productivity, thereby improving industrial relations within the organization.

Moreover, McLeod (2001) reiterates that, counsellors provide a supportive service to clients and employees in the workplace, developments that help alleviate symptoms of ill behaviour which manifest themselves in the form of conflicts, bullying and undermining of unsuitable work conditions or bad relationships with colleagues. Cole (2003) states that workplace counselling opens up communication between staff and employers, and encourages frank discussions. Counselling enables workers to explore alternative solutions to the problems with greater health and well-being resulting in better work performance (Porter, Bingham and Simmons; 2008).

According to Oher (1999), solving personal problems, retains quality staff, giving management greater knowledge of employees and how satisfied they are. This results in improved staff morale, efficiency, absenteeism and turnover thereby reducing grievances.

In recent years, it has been established that workplace counselling has resulted in significant increases of about 15% of compensation claims of work-related stresses in the United States and in Australia. At least 35% of costs of compensation payouts were paid to government workers following work-related stress claims according to the Labour Research Department (1994).

Professor McLeod and Dr Henderson (2003) carried a research review into the outcomes of workplace counselling whereby 34 studies were identified, and included the controlled studies, naturalistic studies in which pre and post counselling data was collected. There was a significant improvement in levels of anxiety and depression caused by work-related stresses by about 60-75% in these researches. In other organisations, workplace counselling is associated with reduction in sickness and absence. There are other organisational improvements like positive work attitudes, fewer accidents, resulting in the industrial relations being uplifted within the organisation. McLeod (2001) concludes that, of these 34 studies, at least 85 percent of those who received counselling at their workplace had experienced increased productivity as compared to those who did not practice workplace counselling.

Mayor (2006) found that workplace counselling can achieve reduction in work-related stress in more than 50 per cent of employees who have received counselling. The findings showed that work-related symptoms and stress had returned to normal levels for more than 50 per cent of clients in two thirds of the studies. When Mayor (2006) analyzed the results of 128 studies between 1980 and 2005, her key findings of the review suggest that, in organizations that make workplace counselling available, 6.5 per cent of employees make direct personal use of the service each year. The vast majority, that is, more than 90 per cent of employees who use workplace counselling, are highly satisfied with the service they have received, thus increased their work performance. It was noted that levels of absenteeism, drunkenness, and sicknesses also fell by 25 per cent, which was a significant positive effects on the level of job commitment, work functioning, job satisfaction, and drop out in substance misuse and work performance improved.

Tehran (1997), found out that workplace counselling assists employees to reduce work-related stress as well as socioeconomic stresses or pressures. The researcher found out that work related stress had decreased by a larger percentage and this was shown by work performance that had increased by 50 per cent as compared to the previous month. In addition, Tehran (1997), suggests that employee-management relationship had also improved within the organisation, thus made an impact on the productivity level.

Highley (1996), sought to establish the link between counselling employees and personnel performance criteria. Stresses that affect employees were confirmed by 30 to 40 per cent of statistics were from sickness and absence from work. This was a major contributor to poor work performance. McLeod (2008) found out that employees have to be aware of all workplace counselling policies and practices for easy evaluation. According to the research, 80 per cent of those who were aware of these policies and practices were able to recommend or use counselling again. McInnes (2007) found out that wellbeing and personal development by employees

is better approached when they are all informed. This gives employees produce better results when all participants are informed of their existence and rationale. This gives employees a better understanding and appreciation of workplace counselling.

Research Methodology

The researchers employed a case study approach in order to collect data. The approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to concentrate on a real scenario, thus proffering solutions to any business that may want to use the stated findings for improving a real situation. The case study also allowed the researchers to give their own judgments and opinions on since they were actually interacting with the participants under study.

Permission to carry out the research at Bulawayo Premier Service Medical Aid Society (PSMAS) was granted by the station's human resources manager. This permission which was in written form was used as the researcher's introduction to approach the sampled respondents for data. Appointments with respondents were made by letters and through the telephone where applicable. The researcher hand-delivered and collected the questionnaires from the sample elements on the same day. Im-prompt interviews were also used where and when necessary. These interviews afforded the researchers the privilege to read facial expressions of respondents and their body language.

Study Site

The case study was conducted at Bulawayo Premier Service Medical Aid Society (PSMAS) in Zimbabwe. The PSMAS in Bulawayo was chosen because, just like the Harare headquarters, it houses all the information pertaining to all employees of PSMAS in Zimbabwe. It was also convenient a study site since one of the researchers was employed at the organisation during the study and therefore access to vital information was easy.

Sampling Method

Using stratified random sampling, the researcher divided the employees into two segments, that is, for management and for general workers. The researchers used 75 per cent of management and 45 per cent of general workers. The researchers used these percentages due to the size of segments and the fact that they are both above the recommended 10 per cent of their respective populations (Best and Khan: 2003). A total sample of 60 employees, out of a total population of 120 employees was selected. From a population of 20 managers, 15 names making up the sample for managers were randomly picked. The same process was repeated for a population segment of 100 general employees from which 45 names were picked for the sample of general workers. However, from the 15 selected managers, 13 managed to respond to the questionnaire while 42 general workers out of the 45 selected general workers also responded to the questionnaire. This effectively resulted in a usable sample of 55 employees.

Details of the sample are shown in table 1 below:

Table1. Sample details

Staff level	Population (N)	Selected sample	Usable sample (n)
Management (Top and Middle)	20	15	13
General workers	100	45	42
Total	120	60	55

Data Collection Instruments

The questionnaire (self administered) was the major instrument used for data collection because it is regarded as the most widely used technique for collecting primary data on respondents' attitudes, opinions, perceptions and demographic characteristics (Moorhead and Griffin: 1985; Leedy: 1993). Questionnaires are also a feasible and objective way to reach out to a large number of respondents. Moreover, they are inexpensive to administer when collecting first hand information. In addition, the use of questionnaires provides a faster and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of quantifiable data from a larger population. Data from questionnaires, especially those with closed questions, are also easy to quantify, analyse and generalize from. These questionnaires also reduced the rate of biasness in the research in that the respondents maintained anonymity when responding and were encouraged openness when responding to sensitive questions.

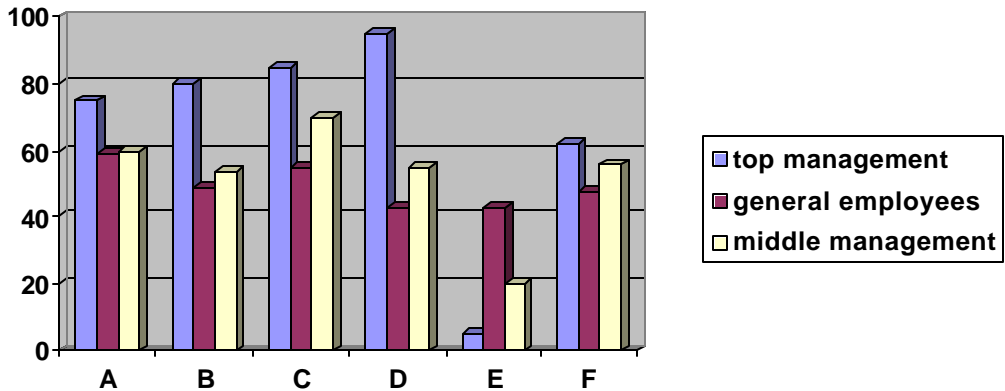
To test the reliability of questionnaires, a pilot study was carried out in which ten questionnaires were distributed to PSMAS employees in Harare. These respondents were not part of the target group for the study. The pilot study allowed the researcher to determine the adequacy of the whole questionnaire to respondents. Finally, this allowed the researcher to come up with well-refined questions that were relevant to the research.

Data entry and analysis

Data gathered through the questionnaire was tabulated and synthesized to give meaning. The synthesised data was then presented in the form of a multiple bar graph (figure 1) and a table (figure 2). Analysis of the data was done immediately below each presentation.

Results

Figure1. Percentages of employees agreeing with suggested roles of counselling at the workplace.



Key

Symbol	Workplace Counselling Roles
A	Well being improvement
B	Boosting employee confidence
C	Improving seriousness at the workplace
D	Redirecting workers
E	Suppresses employees
F	Reduces workplace bullying

The majority (at least 60 per cent) of managers and at least 50 percent of general employees believe that workplace counselling plays roles cited as A, B, C, D, and F. However, minority (at most 43 percent) of general employees support the statement that workplace counselling is responsible for their suppression at the workplace. On other roles, the management’s views neutralised the general employees’ views rendering counselling’s roles as very effective in an organisation.

Table 2. Percentage reactions to favourability of behaviour attributes that are linked to counselling at the workplace

Counselling has nurtured the following behavioural attributes:	managers			General workers		
	agree	Neutral	Disagree	agree	neutral	disagree
Voluntary staff turnover	40	30	30	83	10	7
Rate of absenteeism	61	31	8	59	5	36
Rate of grievances	100	0	0	76	0	24
Retirements	76	0	24	78	8	4
Dismissals	68	0	32	20	70	10
Hearings	76	8	16	71	24	5
Operations costs	100	0	0	0	68	32
Punctuality	73	22	5	62	24	14
Communication	30	40	30	24	20	56

Management and general workers generally seem to observe same linkages (on average of 60 percent) of workplace counselling with favourability of workplace behavioural attributes. Where the majority of managers' views and general employees support the existence of a link between the favourability of behaviour attributes to counselling at the workplace, the minority of general workers see otherwise. However both groups reflect a negative relationship between communication and workplace counselling.

Discussion

The findings from managers at PSMAS are consistent with Carroll and Walton (1999), who states that counselling helps to increase staff morale, boost confidence, self-esteem and improve productivity and efficiency. Concurring with this result, Ramli (2002) clarifies that counselling can deal with employees' behavioural issues, thereby increasing their job satisfaction. Managers' and general employee's sentiments are still consistent with Cole (2003), who connotes that counselling enables employees to experience greater health and well-being, impacting on work performance. Cole (2003) further asserts that, counselled employees tend to perform better and more efficiently, which from a business owner's point of view, is highly desirable. If employees can deal with behavioural issues, they increase their job satisfaction and overall happiness, which will usually make for much better workers.

The minority of the general workers, who disagreed that counselling at the workplace redirects employees, instead suggested that counselling is used for dictating to and manipulating programmes which is inconsiderate of the suffering of employees. Furthermore, they suggested management to be so self-centred that they impose counselling to discipline and torture vibrant employees in the name of

disciplinary counselling. General workers are of the view that management suppresses the suggestions and contributions of employees through manipulative counselling sessions. The revelation that to some extent employees themselves do not believe in counselling deviates from McLeod (2001) and Ramli (2002), who reiterate that counsellors provide a supportive service to clients and employees in the workplace, and alleviate symptoms of ill behaviour in the form of conflicts, bullying and undermining, unsuitable work conditions or bad relationships with colleagues. However, the study is consistent with Carroll (1996) who state that counsellors in most cases are used by management to do their dirty job, for instance, the counsellor may be used as a tool to manipulate a co-worker. In-house counsellors are usually involved in organisational politics, thus making it difficult to conduct their sessions with an open mind and also individuals may use counselling against the organisation through the advice that they are given by counsellors.

The agreement between management and general workers on the favourability of punctuality levels and hearings is in support of Makinde (1983) who reiterates that counselling reduces punctuality problems at the workplace and Roberts (2001) who concluded that counselling reduces hearings as it promotes discipline within the workforce. These results are supported by Carroll and Walton (1999) findings that counselling instils discipline within the workforce thereby reducing punctuality problems. They elaborated that disciplined workforce have fewer work related problems, hence, the reduction in hearings at the workplace.

Moreover, the scenario at PSMAS in terms of communication disagree with Cole (2003), who says that workplace counselling opens up communication between staff and employers, and encourages frank discussions. Respondents especially general workers and middle management alleged that to some extent top management usually do not communicate effectively when it comes to counselling since they are autocrats. This then contradicts, the study findings of Sonnenstuhl and Trice (1995), who concluded that social betterment, personnel counselling, occupational mental health and industrial alcoholism can be blended by management to help their workers to increase productivity and this can also improve the industrial relation within the organization

In general the findings concurs with the findings of Mayors' (2006), who found that workplace counselling can achieve a reduction in work-related problems in more than 50% of employees who received counselling. When she analyzed the results of 128 studies of workplace counselling published between 1980 and 2005, her key findings of the review suggest that in organizations that have workplace counselling programmes, and around 6.5 per cent of employees make direct personal use of the service each year. The vast majority that is more than 90 per cent of employees who use workplace counselling are highly satisfied with the service they received and this resulted in increased work performance. It was also

noted that levels of absenteeism, drunkenness and sicknesses also fell by 25 -50per cent which was a significant positive effects on the level of job commitment, work functioning, job satisfaction and substance misuse and also work performance was enhanced.

Conclusion

The research concluded that there are significant perceptual similarity between management and general employees in Zimbabwe regarding the role of counselling. Management showed that workplace counselling plays an important role in changing employee behaviour. On the other hand, the general workers feel that workplace counselling changes their behaviour to a greater extend. Responses of the general worker also take workplace counselling as a vital issue in an organisation.

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