



Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management in Selected Universities in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract: Conflicts especially interpersonal ones that are not managed emotionally intelligently often result to undesirable consequences. In this direction, this study examined the effect of emotional intelligence on conflict management in five selected Universities in Nigeria's South-East zone. The specific objectives of the study were: to determine the nature of the relationship between self-awareness and positive employee competitiveness; and to ascertain the nature of the relationship between empathy and accommodation. The study adopted survey research design involving academic and non-academic staff of the selected universities. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire which was based on five point Likert scale. Ordinary Least Square regression was used in testing the hypotheses. The results of the analysis revealed that: there is a positive and significant relationship between self-awareness and employee competitiveness; and there is a positive and significant relationship between empathy and accommodation among employees. The study concluded that the possession of certain attributes of emotional intelligence enhances positive outcome in conflict management. Based on the findings, the study recommended that both staff and management of the universities need to be exposed to capacity development programmes that emphasise focus on emotional intelligence.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Conflict management, Self-awareness, Empathy, Employee competitiveness, Accommodation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The term emotional intelligence was first used in 1985 by Vian-Pin but was defined and expounded by Salovey and Mayer (1995). These founding authors of emotional intelligence argue that emotionally intelligent people are those that are capable of monitoring their internal environment and that of others in ways that produce winning outcomes (Goleman, 2005). A number of authors such as Liberty and kida (2019), Bradberry and Greaves (2009) and Lucas and James (2024) have defined emotional intelligence in slightly different ways though converging on the fact that it is an ability. To effectively control behaviour, navigate social situations, and make personal decisions, one needs emotional intelligence. Bradberry and Greaves (2009), Margret (2023), David (2004), Goleman (2005), Williams (2022) and Nirmala (2024) identify five components of emotional intelligence to include self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, self-motivation and empathy. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) further categorized the components into two categories: internal or recognition (personal life), and external or regulation (social life).

Rebecca, *et al* (2015) and Julia, *et al* (2022) assert that self-awareness is the capacity to recognise and comprehend one's own feelings and tendencies in a variety of contexts. Williams (2022), Kristine, *et al* (2022), and Anthony (2015) assert that the capacity to recognise and acknowledge one's emotions as they arise is a major aspect of self-awareness. In fact, Margret (2023) points out that understanding one's talents and weaknesses and looking for both personal and professional growth opportunities might help one become more self-aware. The other component, empathy refers to how one is tuned to the emotions of others (Loannidou & Konstantikai, 2008). Malherbe (2023), David (2004) and Williams (2022) see empathy as the capacity to share and understand one's state of mind

or emotions. Empathy is not only directed towards others but also involves self-awareness. In other words, understanding one's own emotions and being in tune with personal feelings is fundamental to effectively empathizing with others. This dual awareness contributes to high emotional intelligence, which enhances interpersonal skills and overall social competence. One with high emotional intelligence can accurately identify which emotions another person is feeling and can tell the difference between genuine and false emotions (David, *et al*, 2017).

On the other hand, conflict management is the process by which disagreements are settled, unfavourable outcomes are reduced and favourable outcomes are accepted (Zinaida, 2024). Laurie (2017), Yasmyne, *et al* (2024) and Tripathy (2018) argue that conflict management is the degree to which issues are recognised and resolved successfully. The actions taken to avoid conflict at the appropriate moment and to facilitate its swift and amicable resolution are collectively referred to as conflict management. Wendrilla (2022) and Digvijaysinh (2013) point out that conflict arises when people or groups want to fulfil their commitments, needs or wants in ways that are mutually contradictory. Carsten (2010) assert that conflict arises when one party believes that another party has negatively impacted or is about to negatively impact something that the other party values. Fatima, *et al* (2024), Muhammad and Fatima (2014), Asad (2023) and Violeta (2023) identified four types of conflict, thus: intragroup (within groups with similar interest), interpersonal (between individuals), intergroup (between groups), and intra personal conflict (within an individual). George (2021), Helen, *et al* (2019) and Jose (2020) identify interpersonal conflict as the most common type of conflict that occurs in organisations on a daily basis. This type of conflict might emerge between co-workers, managers and employees, or CEOs and their workforce. Every workplace has disputes from time to time, especially interpersonal conflicts, which must be managed skilfully in order to preserve a peaceful and productive work environment. The majority of interpersonal conflicts in institutions are often traceable to stress, dissatisfaction, lack of communication, and rage (Fatima, *et al*, 2024, Marcela, 2020, Alicia, 2008, Benjamin, 2019, Julie, 2014, and Gary, 2020). Given the negative effects of conflicts such as Abdul and Yaser (2019), it is imperative for managers to respond quickly to conflicts particularly interpersonal conflicts in order for an organisation to function smoothly.

A number of strategies have been identified for managing conflicts. Osias, *et al* (2024), Jose, *et al* (2023), Afzalur (2023), Bahadur, *et al* (2022), and Lazim (2018) identify five different approaches to managing conflicts thus - accommodation, avoidance, competition, collaboration and compromise. Michihino and Yoshiyuki (2023), His-An and Ely (2010) and Herrity (2021) note that competition as a strategy for managing conflict is the act of highlighting one's perspective while ignoring the viewpoint of others. It frequently involves people who are forceful and possess the determination to fight for what they believe is right until they win. This style is suitable when quick, decisive action is needed. Individuals utilizing this style often prioritize their goals over finding common ground, potentially leading to resentment among others involved in the conflict (Aayushi, 2017). Afalur (2023) and Zinaida, *et al* (2024) assert that accommodation style of conflict management is the act of showing concern for another person's problem than one's own. In order to effectively manage conflicts, all parties involved must respect one another's opinions. This style of conflict management is useful when the maintenance of relationships is crucial, and the basis of the conflict is less important (Michihino & Yoshiyuki, 2023, Herrity, 2021 and His-An & Ely 2010). However, it fosters harmony, it may lead to personal dissatisfaction and unmet needs if consistently applied, as it involves yielding or giving in to the preferences of others without defending one's interests.

2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Self-awareness, self-control, empathy, and social skills are characteristics of an emotionally intelligent person (Goleman, 2005). These characteristics enable people to choose and succeed in the vocation that best suits them. Emotionally intelligent people are able to comprehend and communicate their own emotions as well as others, influence the outcome, and use one's moods and feelings to drive appropriate conduct (Kahtani, 2013). Managing one's own emotions as well as others

requires a variety of skills, including perception, comprehension, inference, judgement, expression, regulation, motivation, and reflection. When faced with obstacles and disappointments in life, positive emotional intelligence empowers one to handle and resolve issues creatively and to react appropriately to a range of emotions (Hsieh *et al*, 2014). Individuals who possess a high degree of emotional intelligence, such as customers and staff, may empathically comprehend the needs of the customers and find solutions from their point of view. In their study, Onyemaechi and Ikpeazu (2020) found a good and substantial correlation between self-awareness and empathy for co-workers within the organisation. The study of Rahim (2003) revealed that self-awareness is positively associated with self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. Godse and Thingujam (2010) in their study, revealed that self-awareness significantly correlates with the integrating style of conflict resolution. The result of Promsri's (2019) study revealed that empathy has a positive and significant correlation with competing, collaboration, compromising, and accommodating style of conflict resolution. In the study of Fulya (2018), the result of the finding revealed that empathy has a positive relationship with conflict resolution skills. The result of Olga's (2019) study stated that empathy has a positive association with interpersonal and intergroup conflict. In his study Prital (2022), revealed that there is a significant and positive correlation between self-awareness and collaborative, accommodating, competing, and compromising conflict management styles. Equally, Rozilah, et al (2021) have shown that self-awareness has a positive correlation with interpersonal conflict at work. Similarly, Adel (2022) in his study revealed that self-awareness has a favourable association with job performance.

Being able to effectively manage conflict with the appropriate conflict management style in the organisation requires high emotional intelligence. Shandru and Saravanakumar (2022) found a 75% correlation between conflict resolution styles (CRS), such as competition, accommodation, avoidance, and compromise, and emotional intelligence. The results of Sujuan's (2015) study showed that emotional intelligence (EI) has a positive and significant correlation with the ability to integrate, compromise, and compete in styles, as well as with an organization's performance in innovation. In the study by Malherbe (2023), the result of the finding revealed that 75% of the respondents agreed that their perception and conflict management methods had changed positively owing to increased self-awareness of their personality traits. Abdul (2017) found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence at the individual, group, and university levels and four of the five conflict management styles: accommodating, avoidance, compromise, and competing.

3 Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on social cognitive theory as propounded by Albert (1969). Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits that behaviour, environment, and person all interact dynamically and reciprocally within the social context of learning. Through the development of expectations, self-efficacy, and the use of observational learning and other forms of reinforcement to effect behaviour change, SCT offers chances for social support. The fundamental principle of Social Cognitive Theory is that keeping an eye on one's own and others' emotions in social situations can help manage conflict. The theory underscores the role of social interactions, modelling, and shared experiences in sharing emotional intelligence. This theory emphasises that individuals not only learn from direct experiences but also from observing others' emotional expressions and conflict resolution behaviours. Schunk (2012) and Skinner (1950) argue that people actively shape their learning through the interpretation of the results of their activities, which may have an impact on their environments and personal factors, influencing and changing subsequent behaviours.

4 AIMS OF THE STUDY

In many organizations, universities inclusive, most staff easily get entangled in some sort of uncontrollable and disorganized responses to overwhelming work pressures and interpersonal conflicts. Unfortunately, most of these interpersonal conflicts arise on a daily basis during meetings, team work, sharing of resources, presentations and even run-of-the-mill conversations. Most often,

mere misunderstanding and disagreement escalate due to poor communication, lack of empathy, lack of self-awareness, inability to analyse the social context, stress, and recourse to intellectualism as a basis for interaction in the workplace. When such conflicts are allowed to fester, they often lead to irritation, low output, loss of interest in the job, absenteeism, and a decline in employee morale and effectiveness. Conflicts may fester not necessarily due to disregard for others but due to the adoption of strategies that appear logical but are emotionally unintelligent. Interestingly, a number of managers and even researchers consider such intellectually appealing but emotionally destabilizing strategies as the first line of action in addressing conflicts in organizations. This represents a point of departure for this study which recognizes that an emotionally unintelligent approach to interpersonal conflict management often leaves in its trail toxic relationships and disillusionment which have the potential to engender increased staff turnover and a compromised learning and working environment.

The specific objectives of this study were to: determine the nature of the relationship between self-awareness and employee competitiveness, and ascertain the nature of the relationship between empathy and accommodation among employees. Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses guided the study;

Ho₁. Self-awareness has no significant relationship with employee competitiveness.

Ho₂. Empathy has no significant relationship with accommodation among employees.

5 METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional design which involves identifying the experiences of university staff in handling interpersonal conflict against the backdrop of emotional intelligence. It should be pointed out that survey design was adopted because of its descriptive nature, potential to isolate causal relationships and draw inferences from particular to general based on statistical control and appropriate test statistics. Given the experiential and contextual nature of the key variables, a self-reporting questionnaire based on a 5 point Likert scale questions was used in the collection of primary data. Based on 2023 National Universities Commission's source, there were eleven public universities (Federal = 6 and State = 5) in the South-East zone of the country. However, we utilized judgement in focusing on five of the universities, viz Abia state university, Anambra state university, Ebonyi state university, Federal university of technology, and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (www.nuc.edu.ng). These universities had a total of 13,570 staff from which 400 were selected as a sample using Yamane (1967) formula. The sample size was distributed among the institutions using the Bowley(1897) proportionate formula, which took into account the variations in each institution's population. Ordinary Least Squares Regression was used to test the two hypotheses, which focused on the nature of the relationships between emotional intelligence and conflict management measures among university staff. The ordinal data for this study were transformed prior to the hypotheses testing.

6.1 MEASURES

While self-awareness and empathy were used as proxies in measuring the independent variable, emotional intelligence, accommodation and positive employee competitiveness were proxies for the dependent variable, conflict management. The validity test focused on the content and construct validity. While construct validity was measured by comparing the tests to other tests that measured similar qualities to see how the two measures were highly correlated, content validity was measured by depending on experts who were familiar with the construct being measured (Kubai, 2019 and Hamed, 2016). Using data from a pilot study that was obtained from one of the Universities, the test-retest approach was used to determine the instrument's reliability as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Reliability Test of the Various Constructs

S/N	Elements	Items	Cronbach Alpha
1	Self-awareness	5	0.848
2	Empathy	5	0.845
3	Employee competitiveness	5	0.844
4	Accommodation	5	0.862
			0.849

Source: SPSS Output, 2023.

Table 1 shows the Cronbach’s alpha co-efficient for each construct and the coefficient for the overall items of the variables. This was determined by using the composite reliability generated from SmartPLS, which indicates the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally and Berstein, 1994). This strengthens the scale’s overall reliability by showing that the items on the scale are quite dependable and measure a consistent underlying concept.

6.2 RESULT

The questionnaire achieved 58 percent response rate (230 copies). The development, modification, and interpretation of Likert Scales align with the claims made by Ankur et al. (2015) and Mark (2022) based on the study and interpretation of manifest features and question summaries. Table 2 provides an illustration of this. Based on the table, $2 < x < 4.0$ is the acceptable mean threshold. From their apparent characteristics to their latent qualities, the variables are summed together.

Table 2: Interpretation Framework for Likert Scale Analysis

Where $x < 2.0$	Non-affirmative responses or disagreement to statements.
Where $2.0 < x < 4.0$	Moderated opinions and manifestations of the constructs.
Where $x > 4.0$	Affirmative responses and substantial levels of agreement to the scales.

Table 3: Respondents opinion on self-awareness

Dimension	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self-Awareness	Being conscious of my behaviour is one of the things that makes my life worth living in the workplace.	230	3.85	0.934
	I am well enlightened and self-disciplined at all times.	230	4.17	1.373
Self-Awareness	I know when to keep pace with the changing trend and work environment.	230	3.38	1.316
	I have better understanding of my strength and weakness.	230	3.45	1.391
	I have a better understanding of my motive in all situations	230	3.19	1.344

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 3 shows the responses of the employees as they relate to self-awareness. The mean distributions fall within the indicated mean threshold of $2 < x < 4.0$, indicating that the respondents confirm their level of self-awareness, and the data provide moderate evidence of the construct. The table also demonstrates that the respondents' highest mean value of 4.17 indicates the enlightenment and self-discipline of the employee at all times.

Table 4: Respondents opinion on empathy

	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dimension	I have the ability to understand and show concern to people.	230	4.26	0.920
	I get along with my team members.	230	3.04	1.077
Empathy	I try to imagine how I will feel in someone else's situation.	230	3.44	1.115
	I sense and understand the emotional cues of my colleagues.	230	4.24	1.212
	I help out based on my understanding of other people's needs and feelings.	230	3.39	1.693

Source: **Field Survey, 2023.**

Table 4 shows the responses of the employees as they relate to empathy. The mean distributions fall within the mean threshold of $2 < x < 4.0$, indicating the respondent's level of empathy, and that the data provide moderate evidence of the construct. The table also demonstrates that the respondents' highest mean value of 4.26 indicates the employee's ability to understand and show concern to people.

Table 5: Respondents opinion on employee competitiveness

	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dimension	I stand up for my ideas and interests while ensuring they are taken seriously.	230	3.43	1.505
	I make quick recommendation and possibly press for a quick decision.	230	4.19	1.212
Employee Competitiveness	I test my own assumptions and viewpoints and that of my colleagues.	230	3.57	0.811
	I have the ability to effectively protect my interest.	230	4.03	1.125
	I oppose decisions from being made when it is not of my interest.	230	3.83	1.679

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 5 indicates the opinion of respondents on employee competitiveness. The mean values indicate a modest level of affirmation of the construct's existence as they fall within the acceptable threshold. The attribute of making quick recommendation and even pressing for quick decision has the highest mean value of 4.18.

Tables 6: Respondents opinion on accommodation among employees

	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dimension	I assist my team members in meeting their needs by supporting them.	230	4.24	0.989
	I sacrifice my needs and ideas in order to satisfy my colleagues.	230	3.37	1.232
Accommodation among Employees	I put the concerns of my colleagues before mine in order to build harmonious relationship between my colleagues and I.	230	3.76	0.968
	I am always willing to apologies when necessary.	230	3.97	0.968
	When there are issues between my colleagues and I, I go out of my way to restore peace	230	3.99	1.176

Source: Field Survey,2023.

Table 6 displays the distributions for the responses of employees on accommodation. The attribute with the highest mean value of 4.24 is the respondent’s tendency to assist and support members to meet their needs. Nevertheless, the mean values fall within the acceptable threshold which is a conformation of the presence of the construct.

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀: Self-awareness has no positive and significant relationship with employee competitiveness.

Table 6.3.1 Ordinary Least Squares Analysis Result on self-Awareness and Employee Competitiveness

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.702	0.060		28.385	0.000
Self-awareness	0.815	0.020	0.910	41.419	0.000
R ²	82.7%				
Adjusted R	82.7%				
F-Statistics	1715.560				

Table 6.3.1 shows a self-awareness regression coefficient of 0.815 and a p-value =<.05. Therefore, there is a positive and significant relationship between self-awareness and employee competitiveness. The R-square shows the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables which revealed that 82.7% of the total variation in positive employee competitiveness among the respondents, was explained by the variation in self-awareness. On the other hand, adjusted R explains the effect of decrease in the degree of freedom arising from the independent variable. The F-statistics (1715.560) is significant at 5% level, which shows the overall significance of the entire model. Therefore, the independent variables in the model were significant in explaining the change in the dependent variable. Based on the above results, self-awareness has a positive and significant relationship with employee competitiveness.

Hypothesis Two

H₀ Empathy has no significant relationship with accommodation among employees.

Table 6.3.2 Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis Result on Empathy and Accommodation among Employees

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.931	0.056		34.442	0.000
Empathy	0.750	0.019	0.900	39.123	0.000
R ²		81.0%			
Adjusted R		81.0%			
F-Statistics		1530.594			

Table 6.3.2 revealed that the variable empathy has a regression coefficient of 0.750 and p-value = <.05 and is therefore positive and significant. This shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between empathy and accommodation among employees in the five selected Universities in South-East geo-political zone. The R- square shows that 81.0% of the total variation in accommodation among employees in the selected Universities was explained by the variation in empathy. The F-statistics (1530.594) is significant at 5% level, which shows the overall significance of the entire model. Therefore, the independent variable positively and significantly explained the change in the dependent variable. Based on the above, the alternate hypothesis which states that empathy has a positive and significant relationship with accommodation among employees is accepted.

7 DISCUSSION

The result of the test of hypothesis one showed that self-awareness positively and significantly relates with employee competitiveness among staff of the five selected Universities in South-East geo-political, zone. This means that being conscious of one’s behaviour enables one to utilize one’s strength and competence to improve one’s competitiveness within the organization. The result is in agreement with the finding of Godse and Thingujam (2010) which revealed that self-awareness significantly correlates with the integrating style of conflict resolution (avoiding, competing, accommodating, collaborating and compromise). The result is also in line with Abdul's (2017) and Prital (2022) finding, which shows a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and the five conflict management approaches of accommodating, avoiding, compromising, collaboration, and competing.

The result of hypothesis two showed that empathy has a positive and significant relationship with accommodation among employees. This means that empathising with others engenders positive attitude in conflict resolution: people are more inclined to take into account the needs and opinions of their colleagues when they have empathy for them. In other words, empathy fosters a work environment where accepting one another's differences comes naturally to everyone. In addition to improving workers' well-being, empathy promotes an inclusive and encouraging work environment that help organisations succeed. The finding corroborates the works of Rahim (2003) which revealed that empathy and social skills are positively associated with management of conflict in the organisation. The result further corroborates that of Promsri (2019), Fulya (2018) and Olga (2019) which stated that empathy has a positive and significant correlation with competing, collaboration, compromising, and accommodating style.

8 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In view of the established link between emotional intelligence and managing of interpersonal conflicts, the management of higher education institutions can improve conflict resolution through creating awareness and opportunities for their staff to acquire and have various emotional intelligence capacities. Such awareness and opportunities could ultimately promote a healthier work environment, with the attendant positive influence on overall productivity and morale of staff.

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