Counseled and Non Counseled Employees’ Psychological Well-Being in the Workplace: Revelations from Police Force, Uganda

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Abstract

Many facets of work do not necessarily impact on employees’ core life needs. This cannot be said for well-being and life threatening issues, whose implications run very deeply indeed in employees mind, body and soul. The purpose of this study was to investigate the difference in psychological well-being between counseled and non-counseled employees. The study utilized a comparative research and the population comprised of counseled and non-counseled employees of Uganda Police Force (Nsambya Barracks). The purposive sampling strategy was used to select 141 respondents of whom 66 were non-counseled and 75 were counseled employees. Questionnaires were used to collect data with acceptable validity and reliability results at 0.89 and 0.93 respectively. The t-test was used to establish a comparison in psychological well-being between counseled and non-counseled employees. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in psychological well-being between counseled and non-counseled employees (t=6.543, p< 0.05). It was recommended that employers should recognize the need to provide professional counseling services to employees because this will improve employees’ psychological well-being.

Keywords: counseled employees, non counseled employees, psychological well-being, revelations, workplace

1. Introduction

According to WHO (2010) mental health is an integral part of development, yet there is growing recognition within international community that it is one of the most neglected development input as far as achieving millennium development goals (MDG) is concerned. This revelation suggests that globally, mental health represents an integral part of human development as an essential determinant of well-being, quality of life,
hope and directly impacts on a range of development outcomes and obviously a basis for social stability.

Poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of compromised education, poor health, violence, gender inequality, poverty, environment degradation and other global challenges. Integration of positive mental health into post millennium development goals will enhance a range of development outcomes such as, improved productivity and earnings, better employment, higher educational achievement, reduction in poverty levels, better health status, and generally improved quality of life.

However, today it is hardly possible to find a workplace where employee's roles, expectations, and personalities work perfectly together (Psychological Working Conditions, 2009). Nevertheless, certain workplace issues may also cause negative psychological symptoms that lead to the diagnosis of a mental health condition such as severe depression, frustrations, fatigue, generalized anxiety, posttraumatic stress, bullying, sexual harassment, which can lead to physical or emotional harm to those involved (UK Labor Force Survey, 2008/2009).

Workplace issues can lead to poor production or performance, decrease the ability to actually complete work, and possibly lead to legal trouble between employers and employees. In a workplace setting, it is important that everyone feels that they are safe and valued (HWWB, 2009; HSE, 2005/2006). In a situation where employees experience personal and work related challenges, positive discipline such as counseling should be applied for improved and better psychological well-being of the affected employees, without which the organization is not likely to meet its mission and production targets. Employee well-being is therefore an increasingly relevant and necessary consideration in the modern workplace.

Well-being is simply defined as personal happiness or feeling good and living safely and healthily. This means not allowing work and personal related issue to undermine employees’ basic purposes and needs in their lives and by extending the same to their families and loved ones (Maicibi, 2013). Research shows that there is no workplace which is free from stress; workers may find that discussing their workplace stress or challenges with a trained mental health professional is helpful to them.
professionally and personally. However, the person providing counseling services is equally important as Burnard (1993) observed, that one very positive way employees can cope with personal and work related challenges is probably seeking the services of a professional counselor. He further pointed out that, feelings, thoughts and other unresolved physical and health issues that are confined or not well attended to, tend to increase tension and eventually affect employee performance. However, it is not known how far Ugandan organizations have helped employees with personal and work-related problems through professional counseling services to cater for their psychological wellbeing needs and enable them perform to the expected standards and if they do, who provides such services. Within this context, this research intended to test the null hypothesis that there were no significant differences in psychological well-being between counseled and non-counseled employees.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Employee Counseling and Psychological Well-being

“Psycho” refers to emotions, feelings, behavior thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and understanding of an individual (Carroll & Walton, 1999; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). According to Ryff (1995), psychological well-being is operationally defined as; autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and personal growth. Nicholas (1985) shows that negative psychological effect is catastrophic. He points out that emotional support is a central feature for personal growth, development and health functioning.

Peter T.H. Tham, (1998), categorizes employee counseling into two major categories, namely, those dealing with personal problems and those dealing with career development. He states that employee counseling programs that deal with personal problems will specifically dwell on employees’ mental and physical health to help employee resolve personal problems that might, even indirectly, affect job performance. Those that deal with career development programs and needs, normally focus on assessment first, counseling, planning, and training to help individuals make and act on career decisions within the context of the organization’s human resources plans. Each of the two approaches has positive outcomes and is built on the theory that individual and
organizational needs can be compatible (Lubega, 2002). The aim of organizations should be to develop organizational wellness policies to cater for physical, psychological and social needs of employees if they must depend on their skills and abilities to achieve their dreamt goals and objectives. Unlike here in Uganda, South African employers utilize the existence of Employee Assistance Programs to reinforce organizational and employees’ ability to resolve issues, which are beyond supervisors’ ability to address (O’Leory, 1993; Highley & Cooper, 1995; Bennet, 2001). The extra support services help employees find their own solutions to problems affecting their wellness and distracting them from work.

Globalization and increasing advances in technology have greatly impacted on the nature of work worldwide. The last two decades have not only witnessed evolution in the nature of work but also changing demographics of the workforce. Correspondingly, the type and incidence of work-related illnesses, employee complaints and injuries have equally changed (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Earlier studies indicated that, every year, businesses spend over $11 billion on benefits for employees and the cost of prescription and non-prescription drugs increases by 5-10 per cent. These numbers do not include costs of absenteeism, reduced work quality, and lost productivity (Health Canada, 2003; Institute for Work and Health, 2008). The crucial needs of the individual worker, work group and the organization should therefore be given maximum attention by offering solutions to common workplace issues through programs and activities that can include, wellness, pain management, stress management, counseling, workplace safety equipment, health and safety policies, as well as life skills training.

An employee struggling with his project or doubting his abilities needs more exhortation or another training class (Hernot, 1992). Employees in such a situation would need to be heard first, before they open themselves to support new approaches. Even employees with financial and family issues need adequate time of a listening ear from probably a competent, caring and skilled counselor before they demonstrate willingness to work towards achieving standards expected of them. According to (Maicibi, 2007), some supervisors often avoid conducting counseling sessions with employees because they anticipate correctly, that the session will be unpleasant. The anticipation most likely stems from the fact that supervisors lack adequate counseling techniques and skills or
probably dual role responsibilities of serving as administrator and counselors subject their objectivity thus do not enjoy confronting other individuals with judgments about inadequate performance hence abandoning discussion altogether. Avoiding the discussion, however, might trigger double tragedy for both supervisor and supervisee.

Allison (1989) stressed that common mental health issues experienced by employees in the workplace includes anxiety, depression stress issues, difficulties to get along with certain work-mates, marital and sexual issues, bereavement, alcoholism and overload. Failure to have such issues resolved on time is likely to affect employees’ well-being which might deteriorate their performance. According to Copper and Sadri (1991), employees whose organizations show and render some sort of help to their hurting employees are likely to experience less anxiety, less depression, less stress and have high levels of self-esteem and confidence. Probably if all organizations availed professional counseling services instead of some “sort of help” as Copper and Sadri, 1991) points out, their employees’ problems would not only lessen but completely get resolved.

Research findings by JAG (2000) revealed that sexual harassment of any kind in the workplace goes hand in hand with the victims negative feelings about their work environment, performance and their psychological well-being. The same study revealed that the victims of sexual harassment used more of passive coping mechanisms than active coping when faced with this kind of harassment. The victims of sexual harassment revealed to have shared about the experiences of sexual harassment two years after, just because they feared to be misunderstood by their managers and supervisors (Katcher, 2003). The same study observed that supervisors do a much better job of handling job related problems though not all of them, than they do handle personal-related problems. This can probably be attributed to the fact that most supervisors become supervisors due to their job related skills and employees are typically promoted to the supervisory level because of their technical or job problem-solving skills, not their people management skills.

Uncertainty is a major threat to employee mental health in today’s unstable economy. Stress creates a negative psychological impact on employees in the workplace, and it could be one of the main reasons of declining performance of employees.
Surprisingly, personal problems are the dominant health problems in the working age population (HWWB, 2009). Despite high rates of personal psychological challenges in most workplaces, there is empirical evidence that about half of employers think between none and one in twenty of their employees’ declining performance ever result from personal related challenges during their working lives (Sweeney, 2003). Whatever the real source of employee personal challenges may be, it might be right to conclude that some close workmates in particular and workplace in general will have a share of it. Employers should therefore be aware of the need for positive intervention that target both affected employees and organization health.

Low awareness among employers about the effect of employee personal psychological challenges on performance, coupled with lack or inadequate levels of intervention for those silently complaining or with pervasive stigmatizing public attitude (TNS Social, 2009), result in the perpetuation of a set of circumstances that are personally and financially costly to individuals, their families, friends and their workplaces. An effective approach to the management of personal and work related challenges in the workplace could minimize or eliminate most of them and costs associated with staff turnover, absenteeism, anxiety, and tardiness (Sanderson & Andrews, 2006; Hilton, 2007; Duxbury, 2010)

CAOT (2004), remarked that all of a sudden employers are conceding that it is not just good enough anymore to talk about being best practice; but rather have to be best practice. People who are unable to balance work/life report lower levels of job satisfaction, are less committed to their organizations, less loyal, higher job stress and they are more likely to be absent from work as well as take a higher number of days off. Increase in absenteeism as a result of failing to balance work and life demands, cost most companies billions dollars annually in direct costs (Duxbury, 2010).

Increasing amount of research, particularly in the area of 'positive psychology' indicate that traditional methods of managing stress in organizations and workplaces are not sufficiently effective to global economy challenges because mental ill-health indicators at work notably absenteeism, staff turnover and emotional rehabilitation of staff have continued to increase (Aydogdu & Uzel, 2010). This is a caution that probably
quality of working environment and employee modern social interventions such as employee assistance programs which can prevent many health challenges in workplaces from escalating are not given due attention.

Most researchers on workplace motivation have repeatedly reported that employers who are determined to conquer today’s competitive economy would like to have their employees motivated and ready to work, but their biggest challenges include not fully understanding what truly motivates employees to work excellently. Companies that readily meet employees’ essential needs elicit their self-motivation and might produce the best work possible (Burton, 2012). This is a clear indication that in this day in time, if company managers used both financial and non-financial recognitions to make employees feel important in a strategic way would harness the best results by changing and impacting on the amount of sales a company performs. Employers should therefore acknowledge that every employee is a unique being, with different abilities, at a different stage in her/his life, which requires different management techniques.

Some managers have found sense in the ideas of people like Peters and Waterman (1982), whose best-selling book on corporate excellence invite organizations to treat employees as adults, as partners, with dignity, with respect and not as capital spending or automation but the primary source of productivity gain. These cautions are an indication that if the organizations’ target is productivity and the financial reward that goes with it, they must treat workers as most important asset. What differentiates greatly human resources from other company resources under the control of different managers is that humans have emotions. The positive human emotions like excitement and inspiration can really profit organizations, it is therefore of much impedance to accept and manage the negative emotions such as anger and frustration effectively. Dealing with the negative side of employees' emotions is quite hard because it requires listening effectively and supportive communication (Burton, 2010).

In organization where employees’ problems are not a priority; supervisors rarely focus on what really matters most to employees’ mental health. The absence of professional counselors in most of Ugandan organizations therefore is likely to leave the
employees over-burdened by their personal and work related problems, affecting their well-being, which will in turn affect their potential to meet organizational goals.

3. Methods and Techniques

The study utilized a comparative research design to determine whether there were differences in psychological well-being between the counseled (by a counseling psychologist) on either work or personal related issues and non-counseled employees. The population comprised of counseled and non-counseled employees of Uganda Police Force Nsambya Barracks and the purposive sampling technique was used to select 141 respondents. The questionnaires used to collect data were tested for validity (content validity index) and reliability (Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient) with acceptable results at 0.89 and 0.93 respectively. The significant differences were computed utilizing the t-test statistics.

4. Findings and Interpretations

Table 1: Difference in Psychological Well-Being between Counseled and Non-Counseled Employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P-value</th>
<th>Decision on H₀</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological well-being</td>
<td>Counseled</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>390.562</td>
<td>18.56</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>6.543</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Counseled</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>337.027</td>
<td>50.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results from Table 1 above indicated that there were significant differences in psychological well-being between counseled and non-counseled employees (t=6.543, p<0.05). Counseled employees demonstrated a higher value towards their psychological well-being (X=390.57) compared to non-counseled employees (X=337.03). The more an employee accesses professional counseling services, the more his or her psychological well-being improves.

The study findings established that counseling significantly influenced employees’ psychological well-being, and the employees who received counseling had a higher positive value towards their psychological well-being compared to the employees who did not receive counseling. This implied that unlike non-counseled employees,
counseled employees were able to address their work and personal related issues objectively and improvised problem-focused strategies to deal with them hence a source of better psychological well-being. Therefore, counseling empowers employees to have better control over their lives, take their decisions wisely, reduces the levels of stress and anxiety hence improvement of one’s psychological well-being.

The above findings had observations congruent with that of Harter, Scmidt and Keyes’ (2002) contention on impact on the well-being of employees suffering from both personal and work related problems; research work suggestions of Kaiser, Bernet and Van Aalst (1982); Freeman (1983); Eysenck (1995); Sanderson and Andrews (2006) that professional positive intervention into the life of a troubled employee can help him/her access guidance, consolation, advice and solution to his/her problems when the need arises. Thus, counseling can be one of such corrective intervention to release negative emotions and feelings, which are detrimental to psychological well-being. This study’s empirical data suggested that professional counseling services results into a (1) very strong improvement on employees’ psychological well-being such as autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and personal growth as what Ryff (1995) affirmed; (2) counseling improves the emotions, feelings, behavior thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and understanding of an individual as defined by Carroll and Walton, 1999; Harter, Scmidt and Keyes, 2002). On a similar note, Nicholas (1985) pointed out that emotional support is a central feature for personal growth, development and health functioning of the employees.

The findings of this study further revealed and confirmed the points raised in this study’s conceptual and empirical literature reviews (1) that whether the primary source of employee’s problems lies within or outside the workplace, its early resolution will empower him/her to face life’s challenges with a positive attitude; (2) that availability and accessibility of professional counseling ensures that suffering employees have somewhere to go when life’s pressure starts to build up; (3) that counseled employees will register and enjoy the fruits of high levels of self-esteem and confidence hence improved psychological well-being; (4) that without professional counseling one’s psychological state is more likely to be poor and thus, the employee may not be in control
of his or her actions, behaviors and decisions especially during times of distress; (5) that counseled employees were generally better adjusted than their non-counseled counterparts therefore counseling decreases an employee’s vulnerability to adjustment difficulties, emotional and social problems.

The findings that professionally counseled employees demonstrate better adjustment than their non-counseled employees when measured on a variety of factors were also congruent with the study results of Baker, 1995; Ryff, 1995; Neihart, 1991; Kaiser, Berndt and Stanley, 1987; Scholwinski and Reynolds, 1985. The findings of this study further support Aydogdu and Uzel, 2010 research which stated that, in the last two decades Britain and North America medium and large organizations have provided counseling programs to their workers. These organizations reported a decrease in the level of stress caused by the problems and the anxieties among employees who got counseling services.

5. Conclusion

Professional counseling services significantly improved counseled employees’ psychological well-being therefore, the more an employee accesses professional counseling services, the more he/she is able to deal with life/work challenges thus improved psychological well-being

6. Recommendations

Organizations that provide professional counseling to employees should continue doing so and those that do not should consider introducing it in their culture due to the associated positive benefits. Employees who exhibit health-threatening issues should be encouraged to seek counseling for a better and improved psychological well-being. The Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development, non-government organizations, and all policy making bodies especially those responsible to protect the interests of workers should consider designing policies that will introduce compulsory professional counseling services in all Ugandan work places. Organizations’ aims should be to develop organizational wellness policies to cater for physical, psychological and social
needs of employees if they must depend on their skills and abilities to achieve their dreamt goals and objectives.

One of the directions of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is human rights towards productive life. The findings of this study should serve as one of those empirical evidences that the MDG implementers can utilize as generated information to contribute to the awareness and promotion of the advances in productive life. Hence, there is need to investigate the reasons why some organizations do not employ professional counselors to meet employee counseling needs despite the existence of professional counselors in the country.
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