



COUNSELLING EMPLOYEES: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

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Abstract

In the past employers have shyed away from involving themselves in personal lives of the employees. This has been based on the misguided view that the employees should not bring into the organisation issues pertaining to their personal lives. However in the recent past organizations have introduced employee counselling programmes as apart of a wider strategy to enhance employee performance. Egerton University for example, recently introduced a counselling programme for its employees. Recent research work has indicated that what happens to the employees outside the organisation can affect their performance. People who are worried, stressed or upset because of problems in their personal lives cannot automatically shelve these emotions and problems when they enter the organisation's premises. The paper argues that the problems that employees bring into the organization affects their concentration at work and their productivity. The article discusses the significance and justification of counselling employees in organizations and why organizations should be involve in counselling. It also presents the process of introducing a counselling programme in the organization. The study is based on review of literature and empirical studies in the subject of employee counselling. This paper concludes that counselling employees is an idea whose time is here.

Key Words: Counselling, Employees, Performance

Introduction

In the past employers have shyed away from involving themselves in personal lives of the employees. This has been based on the misguided view that the employees should not bring into the organisation issues pertaining to their personal lives. However in the recent past organizations have introduced employee counselling programmes as apart of a wider strategy to enhance employee performance. Egerton University for example, recently introduced a counselling programme for its employees. Recent research work has indicated that what happens to the employees outside the organisation can affect their performance. People who are worried, stressed or upset because of problems in their personal lives cannot automatically shelve these emotions and problems when they enter the organisation's premises. The paper argues that the problems that employees bring into the organization affects their concentration at work and

their productivity. The article discusses the significance and justification of counselling employees in organizations and why organizations should be involve in counselling. It also presents the process of introducing a counselling programme in the organization. The study is based on review of literature and empirical studies in the subject of employee counselling. This paper concludes that counselling employees is an idea whose time is here.

Definition of Employee Counselling.

Kumar (2007) defines counseling is a dynamic interaction between counselor and counselee where a counselor adopts certain attitude and uses knowledge and skill to help a person to learn how to deal with problem faced through self understanding and evaluation with a view to changing behaviour or taking action to solve the problem.

Mwosa (2004) defines counseling as an integrative process between a client, who is vulnerable and who needs assistance, and a counselor, who is trained and educated to give assistance. The goal of the interaction is to help the client learn to deal more effectively with himself/herself and the reality of the environment. The person is helped to use his/her strength to cope more effectively by making appropriate decisions or taking an appropriate action.

For this discussion counselling is defined as a process that is initiated by the counsellor or the manager to assist the employee or subordinate to gain knowledge, understanding and insights on a performance concern. This could relate to the counselee's attitude, motivation or interpersonal skills. Essentially the counselling is to provide timely professional and confidential aid for employees whose personal problems might affect their performance. Counseling in this context is used to imply to help provide to employees through provision of information to employees and helping them to overcome or face the problems that may affect their performance. Traditionally counseling has been used in organizations career development for employees. This paper will focus basically on performance related problems counselling for employees.

According Mwosa (2003), some organisations have introduced counselling programmes for employees based on the realisation that staff members with problems may take more time off work on account of sicknesses that are either real or imagined. Many employees may suffer from stress related illnesses like high blood pressure or ulcers. This can be expensive for the organisation in terms of treatment and time lost. The workers who remain may suffer from the extra load of work, which affects their productivity and may lower their morale

Musomi (1997) affirms that counselling facilitates a meaningful understanding of one-self and results in the establishment of goals and values for a future desirable behaviour. Musomi adds that a counsellor helps a counselee to make alternative choices to either cope or overcome a persistent problem. Through counselling, managers can help employees overcome problems and therefore assist unblock the motivation drives to perform .

Supervisors use controls to help employees achieve objectives. An employee's performance problems may be related to non-job factors. Yet, personal problems generally get worse, not

better without professional help. The supervisor is in the best position to spot and handle problems when they arise. He or she can use counseling to provide relief for the troubled employee. Counseling is a behavioral control technique used by the supervisor to solve performance problems. As a counselor, the supervisor is a helper, discusses the employee's personal problems that are affecting his or her job performance, aiming to resolve them. Supervisory counseling is guidance of the employee's behavior. An employee should be counseled when he or she has personal problems that affect job performance. Supervisors should recognize early signs. Signs of a troubled employee include: sudden change of behavior; preoccupation; irritability; increased accidents; increased fatigue; excessive drinking; reduced production waste; difficulty in coping with training and substance abuse.

Mwosa (2004) strongly believes that the ability of managers to counsel employees is a great asset to the organisation. Organisations that have people trained in counselling will be better able to handle employee problems than those that do not have. Mwosa argues that staff who are feeling anxious, stressed, or unhappy, will not be able to perform very well despite their background and experience. She suggests that if such workers have an opportunity to talk through their problems with trained counsellors, they would be much more productive and motivated to work.

Joshi (2007) states that many firms today realize the importance of attracting and retaining highly skilled, quality employees as a necessary component of their competitive advantage. One of the reasons that a quality workforce along with innovative tools for attracting and retaining has become so important is because previous sources of competitive advantage have become less important overtime. For example, previously, a firm's success was attributed to an emphasis on product and process technology, access to financial markets, developing economies of scale & learning curves, patents, protected and regulated markets & individual attractiveness. Recently, however, some scholars have noted that these traditional sources of success are less important than in the past and emphasize that the selection and management of a quality workforce has become an increasingly critical factor to organizational success. Today, HR practitioners are busy developing new and innovative tools to attract and retain quality workforce.

Joshi (2007) adds that one such tool that soon is likely to gain popularity in the corporate world is Employee Counselling. Employee Counselling is a service offered by companies to their employees. Organizations that care for their employees are perceived as more meaningful and purposeful.

Mwosa (2004) indicates that some of the problems that could be addressed through counselling include:

- Sexual behaviors, which could lead to exposure to HIV/AIDS;
- Drug addiction and alcoholism;
- Family problems;
- Coping with colleagues, supervisors, management and friends (interpersonal relations);
- Money problems;
- Sickness;
- Coping with sudden deaths; and
- Overcoming trauma.

De Cenzo and Robbins (1996) state that one of the most important purposes of employee counselling is to uncover reasons for poor performance in the work place. They indicate that counselling requires good listening on the part of the counsellor who is also expected to attack the unacceptable behaviour and not the person, though they appear difficult to separate. The manager should probe the employee to determine the cause of poor performance and make the employee accept the problem. Foot and Hook (1996) provide the following guide for counseling employees who have social or domestic problems:

- create a conducive environment for the employee to talk;
- listen actively;
- empathize and accept the feelings of the counselee
- identify the problem;
- Identify the solutions;
- identify the preferred solution;
- get the person to accept responsibility;
- agree on the course of action;
- follow up on the action agreed upon.

Kumar (2007) indicates that it is worthwhile to appoint one employee counselor for every hundred employees in an organization. The appointment of an employee counselor will not only help employees to solve their personal and official problems, but will also boost the employee morale resulting in a high standard of service, less grievances and better public relations. An employee counselor can look into the following problems of employees which may include; like leave of absence; job transfer; problems with immediate supervisor; complaint about the co-employees; shift duty; duty on holyday; illness of employees; job promotions; raise in salary; uniform locker; financial problems; debts; property disputes; death in family; marital problems; children's admission in school; children's personal problem; transport and housing problem; and illness in family.

Mwosa (2004) notes that if employees are unhappy, anxious or stressed they will not be in a position to perform effectively. Their productivity will go down and their mental condition will also affect their relations with other employees and supervisors. Foot and Hook (1996) argue that employees who have problems at home may find that being at work might provide a way of relief from having to think about personal problems, but more often the individual's power of concentration would be disturbed by the personal worries. Preoccupation with the worries may manifest themselves in several ways that include: emotional outburst; short temper and impatience; lack of attention to duties; decreased productivity; increase in number of accidents; and increased absence, lateness and employee turnover.

Foot and Hook (1996) point out that people who suffer from stress, anxiety and anger could suffer from the following problems: tiredness due to lack of sleep or poor diet; loss of appetite; over indulgence in alcohol, smoking and coffee; mood swings, particularly a tendency to be more irritable; changed attitudes, loss of interest in work; and inability to concentrate.

De Cenzo and Robbins (1996:251) quote from Commerce Clearing House (1990:4359 - 4360) and provide the following guide for counselling employees who perform poorly.

- **Step one:** document all the problems of performance behaviours;
- **Step two** deal with the employee objectively, fairly and equitably;
- **Step three:** confront the unacceptable behaviour;
- **Step four:** offer assistance to help the employee;
- **Step five:** expect employee to resist the feedback and become defensive;
- **Step six:** get employee to own up to the problem;
- **Step seven:** develop an action plan to correct performance;
- **Step eight:** identify outcomes for failing to correct problems; and
- **Step nine:** monitor and control the progress.

According to a report by family services, a Canadian consultancy firm specializing in employee counseling, the following are some of the statistics on effects of employee problems on performance.

- In 1997, the average employee missed 11.5 workdays to handle personal and family matters, not including sick days.
- Emotional problems account for 23% to 30% of employee absenteeism and up to 50% of industrial accidents
- A conservative estimate of the decreased level in the productivity of an employee who is experiencing personal problems (based on a number of indicators, including absenteeism, tardiness, personal phone calls, idle time, distractions, and sick days at least 35%. (Health Association Statistics: available: <http://www.family servicessea.com>).

The above statistics shows the needs for introducing a counseling programme for employees.

Who should be involve in counseling employees

People who could be involved in counseling employees should include the following:

- Line managers
- Human resources managers
- Peer counsellors
- Volunteer counselors
- Internal trained counselor
- External specialist counselors
- Specialized consultancy firms on employee counseling

It is however important to note that people involve in counseling should be trained

Empirical studies

In an empirical study by Chepkilot (2005) which sought to determine to what extent the public service managers in Kenya agreed or disagreed that providing counseling services to employees in organization would be an effective employee motivation strategy, the approach was endorsed by 77.5 % of the respondents. The results showed the managers in the public service in Kenya recognize the importance of providing counseling services to employees.

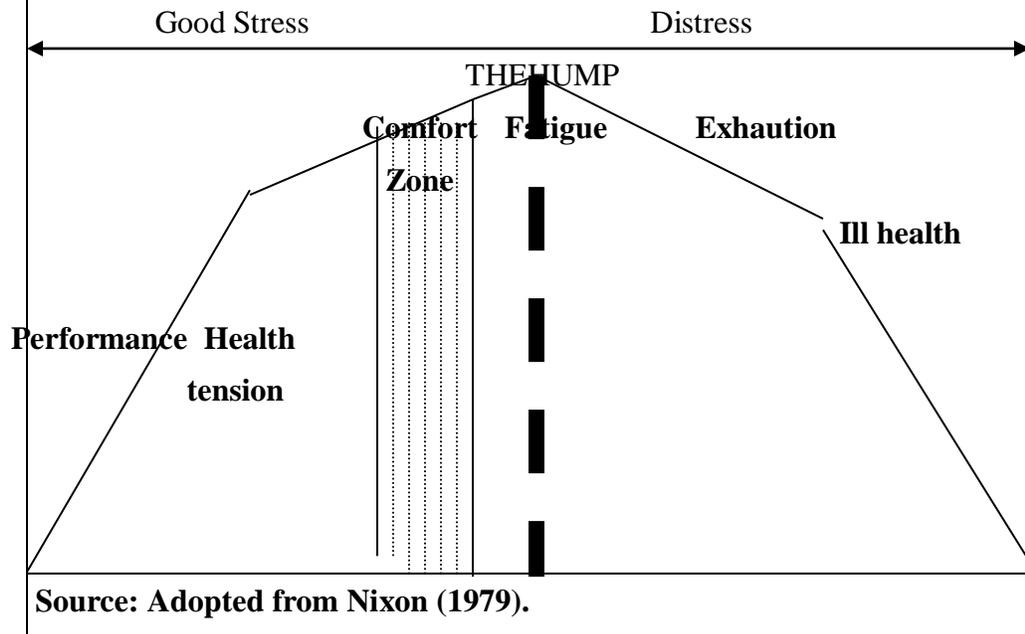
According to an empirical research done by Tham (1998) 89.21% of the subjects showed a positive attitude towards counselling programmes, it was clear that the results were indicative that the employees understood the importance of counselling and how it could have benefited them as employees in the organisation. The positive attitudes of the employees indicated that they valued the services of the counselling programs. This is also indicative that the employees were open to the counselling services being offered. The results also showed that in terms of degree of severity of the problems experienced by the employees, the order of was as follows: career, financial, health, emotional, family and social. This clearly showed that a larger number of staff have more problems in their career than any other areas.

The following were some reasons given by the employees as they expressed their concern in their career: incompetence in carrying out their duties, contemplation of career move, problems with their superior, dissatisfaction with their job, etc. The qualities of the counsellor considered as important by the employees were in the following order: patience, experience, trustworthiness, responsible, physical attractiveness, honesty, status and health. The subjects had chosen patience as the most important quality that a counsellor should possess. This could be due to the perception that this quality will enable the counsellor to spend time to understand more deeply the problems of the counselees.

A research study cited by Joshi (2007) was carried out in a company in India and 69 % of the sample agreed that there was a (perceived) need for employee counseling in the company. The reasons were many, most common ones being to assist employees solve their personal and/or work related problems and to improve the employee relationships and overall culture of the workplace.

Theoretical analysis

The theoretical analysis of this review is based on the human function curve theory by Dr. Peter Noxon, a British cardiologists. The theory is illustrated by the in figure 1 below.



Nixon (1979) theory indicates as follows:

- Basicaklly we require some stress levels for effective performance
- Once an employee’s stress reaches a certain point (the hump), any more stress results in decreased performance. Trying harder at this point is unproductive or even conterproductive. The only sensible move is to take a break.
- We need a certain amount of stress to function well; (health tension). This is called eustres (good stress). However stress becomes harmful (distress) when there is too much, when it lasts too long or when it occurs too often.
- One of the firts sysmtons of distres is fatigue, which we tend to ignore. Nixon (1979) advoctes a health respect for fatigue and doing something about it before it turns into exhaustion.

Every employee must assess where they fall in the curve. We must always try to monitor the curve on daily basis. After monitoring, we must try to take appropriate action. Employees who are distres must be counselled.

Application

It can be noted from the above discussion that there is a strong need for employers to provide counseling services to their employees. In conclusion, the employers should be involved in counseling employees for the following reasons:

- To address problems of productivity, standards of work, attendance, turn-over and the general level of motivation of employees;

- Legal obligation to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees;
- To avoid the development of disciplinary problems; and
- To maintain good employee relations.
- Assists employees advance in their career mobility
- To enhance motivation of employees

From the foregoing we can conclusively assert that employee counseling in the organization is an idea whose time has come.

Joshi (2007) provides a systematic process for introducing and sustaining a counseling system. The process involves which includes – create awareness, educate the employees, then motivate them and finally all this will lead to (expected or required) actions.

1. Creating awareness:

The first step is to create awareness of the existence of new counseling programme. Awareness can be created by various means the most common ones being posters and organizational newsletters and notice boards.

2. Education:

The second step involves the need to educate employees of the need for counseling.

Educating the employees may involve some formal training about the new process to be introduced or leveraging on informal channels. However, a systematic and planned formal approach is usually preferred.

3. Motivation:

After creating awareness and educating the employees, it is imperative to motivate them with the right set of attitudes and values as required for the process. Especially for a process like employee counseling, the mind-set of the employees plays a crucial role in influencing the success or failure.

4. Action:

As is commonly known, actions speak louder than words. If the above three steps are methodically followed, it generally leads to positive results.

Joshi (2007) adds that introducing a system is not more challenging than sustaining a newly introduced system. To ensure sustainability of a new system, whether it is employee counseling or any other, the parameters to determine success need to be well defined. For any system to sustain itself, the process should be crystal clear.

It is now high time should open up for employee-orientated HR processes like counseling. The corporate world is changing and so are the Human Resource Management practices. It is

imperative that we adapt the changing styles to manage our people better. It is not just for the benefit of the employees but in the interest of the organization to show that 'we care' about this important segment of our stakeholders.

In conclusion, Joshi (2007) in his article on poses the question: employee counseling: are we ready for it? The answer is yes.

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