

Competitiveness Among Employees In The Workplace: The Influence of Conflict Handling Styles And Organisational Types

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Abstract: Life generally is all about survival of the fittest, since we are in a competitive world. The present study investigated competitiveness among employees in the workplace: the influence of conflict handling styles and organisational types. Participants were 308, comprising 189 male and 119 female, employees sampled using purposive sampling technique. Two instruments; Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale by Ryckman, Hammer and Gold (1990) and Dutch Test for Conflict Handling by De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta (2001) were used for data collection. It was hypothesized that conflict handling styles and organizational types will not significantly influence employees' competitiveness. The results indicated that conflict handling styles and organizational types significantly influenced employees' competitiveness. It was concluded that the unhealthy hyper-competitive behaviour of employees will threaten the peace and harmony among employees and the organisation in general.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Conflict Handling Styles, Organisational types, Employees.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Competition has been in existence since time immemorial; this is because life generally is all about survival of the fittest, since we are in a competitive world. The workplace is not an exception, as employees both in the private and public sectors compete directly or indirectly for promotions, positions, recognition etc. And as a result, conflict is unavoidable, and often threatens the peace, progress and productivity of such a workplace. The way employees in workplace handle their conflicts on individual, group, or employer/employee basis will go a long way in determining their level of competitiveness.

Competition as a psychological trait has been defined in this manner: "As an individual trait, competitiveness is defined as "the enjoyment of interpersonal competition and the desire to win and be better than others (Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). An alternative definition also noted the interpersonal emphasis: Competition refers to social comparisons involving an unequal distribution of rewards or scarce resources deriving from the relative performance of the participants in an activity" (Mudrack, Bloodgood & Turnley 2012). However, research on competitiveness dated back to the works of Triplett (1897) and Deutsch (1949). They have investigated competitive behaviour from both dispositional and situational perspectives. For example, while Triplett (1897) discussed the role of dispositional or internal factors such as competitive instincts in sports; Deutsch (1949) emphasized the importance of situational or external factors by focusing on how the distribution of valued rewards can generate competitive behaviour. So, two distinct forms of competitiveness exist: general competitiveness and hyper-competitiveness.

Following a theoretical framework based on achievement motivation research, Helmreich and Spence (1978) defined competitiveness as the desire to win against others in interpersonal situations. As such, general competitiveness is a potentially adaptive trait across a wide range of occupational domains, including business, law, and sports (Houston, Carter & Smither, 1997). In contrast to general or "normal" competitiveness, hyper-competitiveness is associated with heightened self-worth fluctuating with underlying low self-esteem, decreased need for others, interest in admiration and recognition from others, and high levels of neuroticism (Ryckman, Thornton & Butler, 1994; Ryckman et al., 1990). The neo-Freudian, Horney (1937) stressed the unhealthy

aspect of extreme competitiveness by linking “hyper-competitiveness” to neurosis. According to Horney (1937) hyper-competitiveness represents an indiscriminate need for individuals to compete at any cost in order to maintain or increase feelings of self-worth.

Theoretically, according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals (“actors”) are propelled by a basic drive—the “unidirectional drive upward”—to improve their performance and simultaneously minimize or pre-empt discrepancies between their and other persons’ (“targets”) level of performance. This “action to reduce discrepancies interacts with the unidirectional push to do better and better” (Festinger, 1954) and generates “competitive behaviour to protect one’s superiority” (Festinger, 1954). Thus, competitiveness is one manifestation of the social comparison process. The direction of social comparison has been studied extensively. Garcia, Tor and Schiff (2013) thus define the term comparison concerns as the desire to achieve or maintain a superior relative position. Thereby, drawing on a number of behavioural and attitudinal indicators associated with competitiveness. Such behaviours and attitudes include competitive behaviour (Johnson, 2012), competitive motivation (Tauer & Harackiewicz, 1999), the desire to win (Malhotra, 2010), positional concerns (Graf, König, Enders, & Hungenber, 2012; Solnick & Hemenway, 1998), unwillingness to maximize joint gains (Armstrong & Collopy, 1996), duplicitous behaviour (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008), lying (Argo, White, & Dahl, 2006), harmful behaviour (Poortvliet, 2012), other enhancement (Shepperd & Arkin, 1991), hostile attitudes (White, Schmitt, & Langer, 2006), biased recommendations (Garcia, Song, & Tesser, 2010), and more. The basic dynamic highlighted by the social comparison model of competition is that two basic sets of factors—namely, individual and situational factors—are capable of increasing competitiveness, across the various indicators, by raising social comparison concerns. Hence, this study anchored on the above propositions to hypothesize.

Recently, Alba, McIlwain, Wheeler and Jones (2014) have proposed that competitiveness is conceptually linked to seeking high status and rank within social hierarchies (especially among employees) which, from an evolutionary psychology perspective, have adaptive significance. Competitiveness has a long research history as a multidimensional construct that incorporates both beneficial and detrimental aspects of social behaviour (Houston, McIntire, Kinnie, & Terry, 2002). From the fore going, it is obvious that conflict is common in the workplace because people always have divergent views on various issues, interests, ideologies, goals, and aspirations (Deutsch, 1990). Some negative consequences of conflict can undermine an organisation’s efforts. However, handled correctly, conflict can benefit individuals and organisations by producing stronger, more resilient working relationship, improving creative output and generating innovative solutions (Omoluabi, 2001).

The inevitability of conflict in virtually all human endeavours and workplace in particular cannot be overemphasized, and this often threatens the peace, progress and productivity of such an organization. As such, this conflict does not exist in a vacuum; it involves the members/workers in an organization due to interdependence of the workers in achieving the organizational and personal goals. More so, it is an unavoidable component of human activity (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier & Chin, 2005) that may be viewed as a situation in which the concerns of two or more individuals appear to be incompatible (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999), and which tends to occur when individuals or groups perceive that others are preventing them from attaining their goals (Antonioni, 1998). More broadly, conflict is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.) (Rahim, 2002). Therefore, the way in which employees approach situations involving conflict is recognized as one’s characteristic mode of handling conflict (Moberg, 1998).

Evidently, conflict has captured a tremendous amount of attention from both academic scholars and practitioners, as they found increasing conflict in and among employees in organizations (Gibson & Callister, 2010; Li, Chun, Ashkanasy, & Ahlstrom, 2012). It has been noted that individuals can have preferences for particular conflict handling styles depending on the nature and the context of the disagreement (Callanan & Perri, 2002). Conflict can be advantageous to employees and organisations alike, but on the negative side, conflict works to the disadvantage of individuals, groups or organizations. For example, findings indicated that intrapersonal conflict had a direct negative impact on intra-group conflict and work satisfaction. Intra-group conflict had direct negative effects on work satisfaction and team performance effectiveness (Cox, 2003). Furthermore, destructive conflict diverts energies, hurts group cohesion, promotes interpersonal hostilities, and overall creates a negative organizational climate for workers (Balay, 2007).

Contributing to the conflicting research results is the absence of productive conflict management skills impact upon the outcomes of conflict. Specifically, conflict itself cannot bring useful functions or harmful outcomes to organizations, instead the conflict outcomes depend on the employee’s personal awareness and acknowledgment of the value of conflict and conflict management skills (Rahim, 2011). Conflict management has been very essential concept in the conflict literature. It can be seen as behaviours which both the employers and the employees use when they are in conflict. Conflict handling styles refer to the specific behavioural patterns that people employ when dealing with conflict (Moberg, 2001). Improper conflict handling styles can

make the existing conflict worse and bring about additional conflicts by way of unhealthy competition. It is only through the application of appropriate conflict management styles that can lead to improved performance of the organization or relationship (Weiss & Hughes, 2005).

Theoretically, conflict management is what people who experience conflict intend to do as well as what they actually do (Van de Vliert, 1997). Although an infinite number of conflict management strategies may be conceived of, conflict research and theory tends to converge on Dual Concern Theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Dual Concern Theory is related to earlier work by Blake and Mouton (1964) and to Deutsch's theory of Cooperation and Competition (1973). De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta (2001) argue that conflict management is a function of high or low concern for self, combined with high or low concern for others. This theory has five conflict handling styles (forcing, yielding, avoiding, problem solving and compromising) that individuals may adopt in handling conflict if it arises. So, high concern for self and low concern for others results in a preference for *forcing*, which is imposing one's will on others. Forcing involves threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments. Low concern for self and high concern for others results in preference for *yielding*, which is oriented towards accepting and incorporating others will. It involves unilateral concessions, unconditional promises, and offering help. Low concern for self and others results in a preference for *avoiding*, which involves reducing the importance of the issues, and attempts to suppress thinking about the issues. High concern for self and others produces preference for *problem solving*, which is oriented towards an agreement that satisfies both own and others' aspirations as much as possible. It involves an exchange of information about priorities and preferences, showing insights, and making trade-offs between important and unimportant issues. Finally, intermediate concern for self, paired to intermediate concern for others results in a preference for *compromising*. Some authors see compromising as 'half-hearted problem solving (e.g. Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Others, however, see it as a distinct strategy that involves the matching of others' concessions, making conditional promises and threats, and active search for a middle ground (e.g. Van de Vliert, 1997). Compromising conflict management suggests the determination of acceptable solutions in which conflicting parties have some degree of satisfaction with a 'give and take' attitude (Cheung & Chuah, 1999). In this strategy parties try to solve the conflict cooperatively (Tjosvold et al., 2001), and communicate in ways in which they can then use the conflict to promote mutual goals and resolve it for mutual benefit (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002). In this study we have depended on De Dreu et al. (2001) conflict management approaches which are commonly used in the literature. In a study, Ogungbamila (2006), for instance, found that the forcing strategy had a direct significant relationship with work frustration while confronting, withdrawing, smoothing and compromising strategies did not. Empirically, there is little or no studies in relation to the study variables and as such created a gap in knowledge, hence the milieu for this study.

The present study was a first attempt to test conflict handling style and organisational types on competitiveness. Thus, in the workplace, employees compete with each other for various reasons. Normally, workplace competition is meant to be a plus for the organization, as it increases productivity, organizational commitment and job satisfaction and involvement. But, the reverse is now the case, especially from the perspective of private and public sector differences. Every worker wants to be recognized, promoted; receive awards, accolades, increase in wages and the like. Socially, they compete in looks, wears, and other material things just to show off their superiority over their counterparts, thereby, given room for that hyper-competitive atmosphere not for the organization but for selfish reasons consciously or unconsciously. All these breeds jealousy, envy, bitterness and cumulate into conflicts. These conflicts will manifest in the way employees relate with each other in the work environment and how they handle these conflicts will reflect their level of competitiveness with their fellow employees. Hence the study investigated competitiveness among employees in the workplace: the influence of conflict handling styles and organisational types. To this end, the research provided answers to the following problems:

- ✓ Will conflict handling styles influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace?
- ✓ Will organizational types influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace?

Generally, this study investigated competitiveness among employees in the workplace: role of conflict handling styles and organisational types. Specifically, the purpose was to:

- ✓ Determine whether conflict handling styles will influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace.
- ✓ Examine whether organizational types will influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were tested:

- Conflict handling styles will significantly influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace.
- Organizational types will significantly influence employees' competitiveness in the workplace.

II. METHOD

Participants:

A total of 308 participants comprising 189 male and 119 female workers between the ages 24 – 67 years ($M = 48.91$; $SD = 10.10$) were sampled using purposive sampling technique from the population of public

and private organizations in Enugu metropolis. They were further grouped as follows: workers with yielding conflict management styles, workers with compromising conflict management styles, workers with forcing conflict management styles, workers with problem solving conflict management styles and workers with yielding conflict management styles in private and public sector organisations respectively.

Instrument:

Two instruments were used for this study:

Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (HCA). The HCA is a 26-item, self-report questionnaire, developed by Ryckman, Hammer and Gold (1990) which assesses an individual's need to compete and win at all costs, so to achieve a sense of self-worth, as well as the manipulation, aggressiveness, exploitation, and denigration of others. It is rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never true for me) to 5 (always true for me). It has direct and reverse-scored items. Sample items from the HCA include: "I cannot stand to lose an argument" and "Winning in competition does not give me a greater sense of worth" (reverse scored). Internal consistency coefficient has been reported by Ryska (2002) between athletes and non-athletes .65 and .85 respectively. Ryckman et al. (1990) reported adequate internal reliability ($r = .91$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .81$). The researchers obtained internal consistency coefficient alpha of .82 using 46 participants in a pilot study from cooperate organizations.

Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH). DUTCH is a 20-item, developed by De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta (2001), designed to measure conflict handling behaviours by individuals/workers in a conflict situation. DUTCH contains four items measuring each of the five styles of handling conflict (yielding, compromising, forcing, problem solving and avoiding). These are measured on five-point Likert-type scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (5). De Dreu et al. (2001) reported alpha reliability coefficients for the yielding, compromising, forcing, problem solving and avoiding were .86, .92, .89, .82, and .92, respectively. The researchers, in pilot study obtained the following Cronbach alpha coefficients; .70, .66, .72, .67 and .66, respectively.

Procedure:

The researchers wrote and obtained permission from the managements of the organizations that had the criteria recommended by the focus group discussants due to the nature of the study. The criteria were based on organisations where employees engage in solo activities in achieving the organizational goals and objectives. Such identified organisations include: schools (primary, secondary and tertiary), law firms, transport companies and hospitals. Afterwards, employees (participants) were purposively sampled from 5 private primary and 6 private secondary schools; 5 public primary and 6 public secondary schools; 5 law firms, 2 private tertiary institutions; 3 public tertiary institutions; 3 private hospitals; 2 public hospitals; 2 private transport company and 1 public transport company. The researchers carried out rapport in educating the participants especially those who were educationally disadvantage on the purpose and procedure for the research. A total of 500 copies of the questionnaire were administered within 6 weeks. At the end 401 copies (80.2%) were returned, after collation, 93 copies (18.6%) were discarded due to incompleteness and errors. Hence, 308 (61.6%) copies were scored and analysed in testing the hypotheses.

Design/Statistics:

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study while ANOVA F -test statistics was employed in testing the hypothesis. The reason for the statistic was due to the fact that we have 2 independent variables with 5 and 2 levels on one dependent variable. This is appropriate because statistically, it is advantageous in that it avoids the problem of producing type I errors that is incurred if we make multiple comparisons between pairs of means using several t tests (Coolican, 2009).

III. RESULTS

An Analysis of Variance with self-rated conflict handling styles (yielding, compromising, forcing, problem solving and avoiding) and organisational types (public and private sectors) as between subject factors revealed that: the main influence of conflict handling styles yielded an F ratio of $F(5,298) = 6.31, p < .001$ (see table 2), indicating that the mean score of employees on hyper-competitiveness was significantly greater for employees with forcing conflict handling style ($M = 88.11, SD = 15.24$) than for other employees with problem solving conflict handling style ($M = 79.30, SD = 16.03$), avoiding conflict handling style ($M = 79.00, SD = 12.70$), compromising conflict handling style ($M = 76.98, SD = 16.34$) and yielding conflict handling style ($M = 71.14, SD = 16.36$) respectively (see table 1).

On the other hand, the main influence of organisational types yielded an F ratio of $F(5, 298) = 4.01, p < .05$ (see table 2), indicating that the mean score of employees on hyper-competitiveness was significantly

higher in the public sectors ($M = 78.48, SD = 15.12$) than in private sectors ($M = 76.08, SD = 17.32$)(see table 1). However, the interaction effect was not significant, $F(5,298) = .45, p > .75$ (see table 2).

Table 1: Summary table of weighted means on competitiveness among employees in the workplace: the influence of conflict handling styles and organisational types in Enugu

Conflict Handling Styles	Organisational Sector	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Workers with Yielding Conflict Handling Style	Private Sector	69.95	18.25	41
	Public Sector	72.83	13.38	29
	Total	71.14	16.36	70
Workers with Compromising Conflict Handling Style	Private Sector	76.20	16.93	45
	Public Sector	76.51	16.02	59
	Total	76.38	16.34	104
Workers with Forcing Conflict Handling Style	Private Sector	86.11	16.02	19
	Public Sector	92.88	12.86	8
	Total	88.11	15.24	27
Workers with Problem Solving Conflict Handling Style	Private Sector	77.63	17.05	41
	Public Sector	81.44	14.61	32
	Total	79.30	16.034	73
Workers with Avoiding Conflict Handling Style	Private Sector	75.68	13.89	19
	Public Sector	83.20	9.92	15
	Total	79.00	12.70	34
Total	Private Sector	76.08	17.32	165
	Public Sector	78.48	15.12	143
	Total	77.19	16.36	308

Table 2: Summary table of ANOVA *F*-test on competitiveness among employees in the workplace: the

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	7420.376 ^a	9	824.486	3.288	.001
Intercept	1393508.023	1	1393508.023	5557.580	.000
Conflict Handling Styles	6324.131	4	1581.033	6.305	.000
Organisational Types	1004.342	1	1004.342	4.006	.046
Conflict Handling Styles * Organisational Types	447.638	4	111.909	.446	.775
Error	74720.543	298	250.740		
Total	1917679.000	308			
Corrected Total	82140.919	307			

a. R Squared = .090 (Adjusted R Squared = .063)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conceptualized based on happenings among Nigerian public and private sectors employees, whereby employees compete on individual basis which is not in line with the usual trend of group competition, brand competition, price competition etc that dominate the literature. This trend of competitiveness usually generates conflicts of which the employees must handle in order to remain in their work and function. Therefore, theoretically, there are different conflict handling styles of which employees are expected to use when conflict arises, therefore, it was hypothesised that an employee’s level of competitiveness will be determined by the conflict handling styles he/she adopts.

Therefore, the findings of this study revealed that the two hypotheses tested which stated that “Conflict handling styles will significantly influence employees’ competitiveness in the workplace” and “Organizational types will significantly influence employees’ competitiveness in the workplace” were both confirmed. Meaning

that conflict handling styles and organisational types remarkably influenced employees' level of competitiveness with the forcing style of conflicting handling style been the most outstanding style influencing competitiveness followed by problem solving, avoiding, compromising and yielding respectively. This, for instance, confirmed the findings of Ogunbamila (2006), that the forcing strategy had a direct significant relationship with work frustration. Also employees in the public sector were shown to be higher in competitiveness than those in the private sector.

The outcomes of this study were not surprising, since in organizations, employees cooperate to accomplish shared objectives and visions as mapped out by the managements, but concurrently compete for resources that are relatively scarce (e.g., pay raise, recognitions, popularity, promotions, positions etc.). Therefore, the relative peace and harmony existing in this organisation are being stretched leading to bickering, jealous, anger, backbiting, and the like. However, the way individual employees handle these conflicts go a long way to say something about their competitiveness. Hyper-competitiveness is a trait in which employees show heightened self-worth fluctuating with underlying low self-esteem, decreased need for others, interest in admiration and recognition from others, and high levels of neuroticism (Ryckman et al., 1994; Ryckman et al., 1990). And that is why the neo-Freudian, Horney (1937) stressed the unhealthy aspect of extreme competitiveness by linking "hyper-competitiveness" to neurosis. According to Horney (1937) hyper-competitiveness represents an indiscriminate need for individuals to compete at any cost in order to maintain or increase feelings of self-worth.

So, by way of implications, employers should be aware that there is a relationship between conflicting handling styles and competitiveness among employees. Again, conflict handling styles that designate high concern for self and low concern for others breeds high level of competitiveness among employees can hamper the peace and harmony in any given organization. Again, hyper-competitive employees might be masking all kinds of inadequacies. This is because hyper-competitiveness is associated with poor interpersonal relations, dysfunctional impulsivity and incidence of rage and accidents. On the other hand, employers should also note that competitiveness can bring out the best in people. It can make them go that extra mile to put in that special effort which can bring about results but this is only when competition is healthy.

It is therefore recommended that employers both in the public and private sectors should find a way of repressing dangerous competitive drive among employees in the workplace. They should lay more emphasis on educating employees on healthy aspect of competitiveness by providing a level playing ground for employees. That is to say, employers should frown at any form unhealthy competition because of its supposed long and short term negative effects on the losers. Thus, it is recommended that all employees are to have prizes or no competitions will be allowed at all.

Although the hypotheses in this study were supported, the study has a number of limitations. It should be noted that the study was newly conceptualized and as such lack adequate empirical studies to back up the outcomes of the study variables (conflict handling styles, organizational types and competitiveness). Again, generalization of results of this study is limited by its scope, the study is on the other hand, made contribution to existing literature on the influence of conflict handling styles and organisational types on competitiveness. Further studies in this area is suggested, so as to close the gaps that the present study failed to cover, for instance; variables like positions, groups, gender, personality traits how they relate with the study variables; how competitiveness and conflict handling styles may relate with job involvement, cooperation and group cohesiveness.

Conclusively, based on the findings the researchers, the results provided a more comprehensive view of the influence of conflict handling styles and organisational types on competitiveness by showing the degrees at which employees indulge in hyper-competitiveness in their workplace. To this end, it was concluded that conflict handling styles and organisational types influenced employees' competitiveness with those using forcing conflict handling style the major culprit as well as those in the public sector, as such, the unhealthy hyper-competitive behaviour of employees will threaten the peace and harmony among employees and the organisation in general.

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