

**COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS PREDICTORS OF CONFLICT
MANAGEMENT STYLE OF ROAD TRANSPORT UNION
LEADERS IN LAGOS STATE**

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ABSTRACT:

The study examined the joint and relative influence of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) on conflict management style of road transport union leaders in Lagos State. Survey research design was adopted and a sample of 610 respondents was selected using purposive sampling procedure. A modified and well simplified questionnaire on communication skills ($r=0.78$) and conflict management style ($r=0.86$) were used. Two research questions were answered using multiple regressions. The three independent variables jointly predicted the conflict management style of the respondents ($R=0.464$). Specifically, the predictors contributed 21.1 % (adjusted $R^2=0.211$) to the variance of the dependent measure. This contribution is shown to be significant ($F(3,606) = 55.448$; $p < 0.05$). Also, each of the independent variables significantly ($p < 0.05$) predicted the dependent variable, with literacy having the greatest relative contribution ($\beta=0.318$). Therefore, it is recommended among other things that government and other stakeholders in the road transportation sector could organize non-formal literacy education programme at motor parks. Qualified facilitators who understand what adult literacy is all about should be put in charge. Also, reading and writing materials could be provided at subsidized rate to encourage members of the NURTW acquire basic literacy skills. By so doing, the communication skills of the union leaders could be enhanced and their conflict management skills improved.

Key words: Literacy, verbal skill, active listening skill, conflict management style, NURTW leaders.

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Introduction:

Conflict is bound to ensue in every human grouping. This is largely due to the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/or groups that constitute the social organization (Edwards, 2000; Omoluabi, 2001; Otite, 2001). Though conflict is not inherently harmful yet its outcome could be destructive if it is not properly handled by the parties involved (Hammed, 2002; Ogunyemi, 2005; Bankole, 2009).

However, the increasing rate of industrial conflict particularly in the road transportation sector of Lagos State has been attributed to the conflict management style of leaders in the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) who seem to lack the required skill to manage conflict effectively (Animashaun, 2007; Bankole, 2007).

Though past studies (Hammed, 1999; Okurame, 2000; Aremu, 2007; Elizabeth-Scott, 2007) had identified some skills such as emotional intelligence, assertiveness skill, interpersonal skill, communication skill and a host of others that can stimulate general positive behaviours in individuals, nevertheless, not much has been done relating to the specific effects of the skills on conflict management style of union leaders especially in road transportation sector where industrial conflicts are persistently on the increase especially in Lagos State.

It is observed that the literacy level of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector is generally low. This seems to be affecting adversely the way they communicate and interact among themselves and between them and the significant others such as commuters, government agencies, bus drivers, and bus owners. This explains why there is always violent destruction of life and properties anytime the leaders at garages or motor parks are to be changed. It is based on the foregoing that this study investigated the relationship between communication skills and conflict management style of road transport union leaders, using leaders of the NURTW in Lagos State as a point of reference.

Conflict management style refers to the behavioural orientation of an individual in conflict situation. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identified five basic conflict management styles namely:

Dominating Style: The dominating style relies on the use of position, power, aggression, verbal dominance and perseverance. Individuals with dominating style go all out to win their objective and, as a result, often ignore the needs and expectations of the other party. This style depicts a

win-lose situation where an individual has high concern for self and low concern for others. It is a power oriented style because it typically involves fighting for a right or defending a position stubbornly and rigidly through persistent argument. Individual with dominating style is very assertive and not cooperative. Thus, the dominating style is effective but not appropriate.

Accommodating Style: The accommodating style presents a lose-win situation in which an individual plays down the differences and emphasizes commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. An individual with this style has high concern for others and low concern for self. This style is thus an opposite of dominating style because it involves an element of self-sacrifice and is a reflection of low self-esteem. This style is considered appropriate but not effective.

Avoiding Style: The avoiding style represents a lose-lose situation. Individuals with avoiding style may physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflict scene, postpone an issue until a better time, simply withdraw from a threatening situation, change and/or avoid topics, employ noncommittal remarks or make irrelevant remarks or jokes as a way to avoid dealing with the conflict at hand. This style does not solve the problem rather it postpones the evil day. Thus, it leaves the parties feeling more hurt, frustrated, annoyed, angry and resentful. The avoiding style is generally seen to be ineffective and inappropriate.

Collaborating Style: The collaborating style focuses on problem solving in a collaborative fashion. It is the opposite of avoiding style because it involves high concern for self and for others. Individuals with this style face conflicts directly and try to find new and creative solutions to the problems by focusing on their own needs as well as on those of others. The style leads to win-win situation and both parties are usually satisfied with the outcome of the resolutions and relationships are often restored. Thus, the collaborating style is regarded to be appropriate and effective.

Compromising Style: The compromising style involves give-and-take or sharing whereby both parties sacrifice for a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean trading concessions, splitting the difference, or finding a satisfactory middle ground. It is a unique style of managing conflict because it represents the mid-point on the dimensions of production orientation versus people orientation. It is based on the principle of reciprocity. Thus, the compromising style is partially appropriate and partially effective.

However, the focus of this study was not to consider which of the identified conflict management styles is the most appropriate in managing conflict in all situations, rather the study was interested in examining the influence of communication skills on conflict management style of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector in Lagos State.

Communication as a concept has been defined by some scholars (Muo, 2001; Soola, 2003; Lanihun, 2003; Salawu, 2007) as a process of exchanging information between two individuals and transmitting information message from one person or group to another. In his contribution, Johnson (2001) describes communication as the total process by which one person shares and imparts information on other person so that both of them clearly understood each other.

Essentially, every human being as a social being plays many roles in life such as parents, workers, union leaders, friends, boss and many others. It is, however, noteworthy that in all these roles, there is one skill that is extensively used all through life, and that is communication skill. Perhaps this is why communication skill is considered as the bedrock of other competences that helps an individual to build good relationship with others.

However, Southam (2006) identifies three components of communication skills: literacy, verbal skills and listening skills. This suggests that every communicator is expected to possess basic skills in writing, speaking, active listening in order to make his/her communication effective. Suffice it to say that for an average trade union leader to be able to interact well with significant others and manage interpersonal conflict effectively, he needs basic communication skills.

The above argument conforms to the opinion of Trapans and Gettings (1989) that improved communication skills sustain industrial peace and harmonious relationships among workers generally. Also, Ajala (2003) corroborates this position when he said good communication is one of the key skills needed to be acquired in peace education for successful conflict resolution.

Bakare (1992) amplifies the same view when he posited that male workers tend to exhibit more aggressive behaviour than female due to lack of communication skills on the part of the male workers. In a similar study that investigated communication skills and conflict resolutions strategy of workers, McDowell (1990) as cited in Akintayo (2005) observes that due to lack of interpersonal communication skills, male negotiator tends to express its opinions forcefully and prefers to assume control or dominate argument. Whereas its female counterpart who possesses

relative higher degree of communication skills tends to integrate argument and offers trade-offs to reach agreement.

Writing on the same subject, Adepoju (1998) affirms that an effective communication is fundamental to effective conflict management and that without good communication skills, problem cannot be understood let alone get the conflicts arising from the problem resolved. It is this fact that therefore underscores the importance of communication skills in conflict management process.

Based on the literature reviewed, the **objective** of this study is to examine the composite and relative effects of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) on conflict management styles of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector in Lagos State.

The two **research questions** raised for this study are:

- (i) What is the joint effect of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) on conflict management style of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector?
- (ii) What is the relative effect of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) on conflict management style of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector?

Methodology:

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. A sample size of 610 leaders of NURTW from various motor parks in Lagos State was selected using purposive sampling procedures. The age range of the respondents is between 25 and 50 years with minimum qualification of first school leaving certificates. A modified and well simplified questionnaire on communication skills developed by PsychoTests.com (2008) and 15-items conflict management style inventory developed by Rahim (1983) were the instruments used. Translation was made where necessary. The two scales were pre tested and their reliability coefficients are 0.78 and 0.86 respectively. Four point response rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was adopted for the study. The questionnaires were administered

by the researchers with the assistance of two experienced research assistants. A total of 800 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 627 were returned but 610 copies representing 76.2% were found valid for analysis. Data were analysed using multiple regression to answer the research questions.

Research Question 1

What is the joint effect of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) on conflict management style of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector?

Table 1: Regression analysis on the joint effect of communication skills on conflict management style of trade union leaders in the road transportation sector.

R=0 .464					
R ² = 0.215					
Adjusted R ² =0.211					
Standard Error of the Estimate = 5.1267					
Variables	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	4372.094	3	1457.365	55.448	.000
Residual	15927.626	606	26.283		
Total	20299.720	609			

Significant at $F_{(3, 606)} = 55.448; p < 0.05$.

The results in Table 1 show that the three elements of communication skills which constitute the independent variables when taken together yielded a co-efficient of multiple regression $R = .464$ and adjusted $R^2 = .211$, which implies that 21.1 per cent of the total variance in the conflict management style of road transport union leaders is accounted for by the combination of the three independent variables.

The table further established that the joint contribution of the independent variables did not occur by chance as it produced F- ratio value of 55.448, significant at 0.05 alpha level. This lends credence to the effectiveness of the three independent variables in predicting conflict management style of road transport union leaders.

Research questions 2

What is the relative contribution of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) to the total variance in conflict management style of road transport union leaders?

Table 2: Relative contribution of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) to the prediction of conflict management style of road transport union leaders

Variable	Unstandardized co-efficients		Standardized co-efficients	T	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Literacy	.179	.021	.318	8.529	.000
Verbal Skill	.081	.026	.115	3.162	.002
Active Listening Skill	.125	.019	.240	6.468	.000
Constant	11.356	2.557		4.442	.000

Significant at $P < 0.05$

The results on Table 2 show that all the independent variables separately made significant contribution to the prediction of conflict management style of road transport union leaders. For instance, literacy has a relative significant effect of $\beta = .318$; $t = 8.529$; $p < 0.05$; verbal skill has a separate significant effect of $\beta = .115$; $t = 3.162$; $P > 0.0$; while active listening skill has a relative effect of $\beta = .240$; $t = 6.468$; $p < 0.05$. Though all the three independent variables made significant relative contribution, the result showed that literacy is the most potent predictor of conflict management style of road transport union leaders. This result is probably due to the fact

that the literacy level of a person determines to a large extent his ability to speak well and give rapt attention to the ideas or opinions being expressed by others.

Discussion

The results obtained from the analysis especially on research question one indicated that the three independent variables namely literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill jointly predict the criterion variable. The predictors made significant joint contribution of 21.1 per cent (adjusted $R^2 = 0.211$) to the variance of the dependent variable. Also, the result produced F- ratio value of 55.448, which implies that the joint contribution of the three predictor variables did not occur by chance instead the F- ratio value lends credence to the effectiveness of the three independent variables in predicting the conflict management style of the respondents. The outcome of this multiple regression analysis found support in the works of Trapans and Gettings(1989), Adepoju(1998), Johnson(2001), Ajala(2003), and Animashaun (2007) that communication skills occupy a central position in the management of conflict and that without good communication skills problem cannot be understood let alone get the conflict arising from the problem resolved.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study had shown clearly that the three elements of communication skills (literacy, verbal skill and active listening skill) significantly predicted the conflict management style of road transport union leaders in Lagos State. Therefore, it was recommended that an intervention non-formal literacy education programme be organized by government and other stakeholders at motor parks to enable members of the NURTW acquire basic literacy skills. Also, qualified facilitators that understand what adult literacy is all about should be put in charge of the programme. Again, adequate stationeries should be made available at subsidized rates. The literacy level of members of NURTW must equally be ascertained before they are placed in position of leadership at garages and motor parks. In essence, government should enforce it that any person that wants to occupy position of leadership at motor parks must have attained a reasonable level of literacy.

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