

Challenges of Managing Ethnic Workforce Diversity: A Case Study in Abuja, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Due to globalization and the progressive development in the country, migration in Nigeria is inevitable. Globalization and advancement in Nigeria have led to the increase in ethnic diversity in the workforce of organizations as individuals from diverse unique ethnic backgrounds, orientations, culture, etc. tend to display their different ideas and perspectives to life in the organization and it has been a challenging task for the human resource management to manage these differences. This study examines the challenges faced in managing an ethnically diverse workforce and how it influences the productivity of the organization. A qualitative research approach was employed on a sample of 49 staff of different levels in a real estate company in Abuja Nigeria, who were administered a semi-structured interview. The findings reveals that the cultural differences of the employees influence their organizational behavior in the workplace, which pose a challenge for the human resource managers to properly manage.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, Case study, Human resource management, Humanizing, Grounded Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and migration increase the general integration of economies all over the world, especially through business and financial activities which tends to increase the rate of ethnic diversity in organizations. Globalization, which is an ongoing process is viewed as a complex and dynamic phenomenon (Mir, et al, 2014). On the other hand, Bartram, et al (2014:11) defined international migration as “the movement of people to another country, leading to temporary or permanent resettlement; in the aggregate it commonly raises questions about national identities and social membership”. Individuals tend to migrate to different cities away from their ancestral hometowns, and form new communities, which has given rise to the rate of ethnic diversity in cities.

Nigeria, being the giant of Africa, is an attractive market for multinationals from across the world, a country of unique and diversified cultures as well as a nation where businesses have great tendencies to flourish. (Bala & Tar, 2021; Adesina, et al, (2020). With the increasing rate of globalization in the country, ethnic diversity in the workforce of organizations is inevitable. Diversity is a holistic concept currently undergoing socio-cultural metamorphosis around the globe and due to its complexity, it is regarded as one of the most challenging issues faced in organizations today (Cletus, et al, 2018), as it has created an atmosphere of multicultural dynamism in many organizations (Peoplescout, 2018; Hunt et al, 2015). Workforce diversity according to Amaliyah (2015) is defined as a concept which denotes the differences between people working in or for an organisation, while according to Barak (2016, p. 136) workforce diversity refers to “the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such

as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications.” Ethnic Diversity on the other hand Ethnic diversity could be seen as the marked differences between people of many ethnic groups, as well as slight variations in behavior of persons in the same ethnic group, that coexist within the greater culture (Katsiaticas et al, 2013). Ethnic diversity is also viewed as ethnic fragmentation (fractionalization)—that is, the composition of a given context as a function of the number and size of different ethnic groups.

Based on different research studies which proved the advantages and challenges of ethnic diversity in the organization, (Emma, 2019; Hunt, et al, 2015; Dhuppar, 2015; Ikon & Okolie-Osemene, 2017; Hofhuis et al, 2016; Ugwuzor, 2014; Dike, 2013); it is believed that ethnic diversity could be seen as a source of strength to some organizations while some considered it as a source of weakness, therefore, ethnic diversity could be viewed as a double edge sword (Zhan et al, 2015). The positive implications of diversity are usually acknowledged in terms of cognitive outcomes such as greater innovation, ideas, and creativity that employees from distinct social backgrounds could bring. However, the negative implications of diversity are usually acknowledged in terms of adverse behavioral and affective outcomes such as less social cohesion, relational conflicts, and higher staff turnover due to employees’ perceived dissimilarity and adverse stereotypes about dissimilar employees (Ikon & Okolie-Osemene, 2017; Hofhuis et al, 2016; Ugwuzor, 2014). (Koopmans & Schaeffer 2015); thereby posing a challenge to the managers.

Based on previous research, it is understood that ethnic diversity in a team could be seen as a double edged sword due to its positive and negative effects in the organization which were pointed out in different studies; the literature review also reveals that some managers lack managerial skills to properly manage an ethnically diverse team, which pose a challenge in management and this affects job performance as was invariably pointed out by another study which proves that successfully managing diversity can lead to more committed, better satisfied, better performing employees and potentially better financial performance for any organization, it also reveals that managing an ethnically diverse team is not an easy task as it involves dealing with individuals from diverse ethnic groups and backgrounds who have different beliefs, understanding, orientations and perceptions to life.

Majority of the research studies utilized the quantitative research approach which tend to limit the findings, and this comes off as a gap because most studies did not reveal the human factors at the micro level involved in managing an ethnically diverse team as there were no deep connections with the managers to fully understand the challenges faced in managing an ethnically diverse team. This study utilizes the qualitative approach, which creates room for an in-depth communication with the respondents through a semi-structured interview, thereby gathering substantial relevant data for the research under study.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a constructivist grounded theory approach to collect data through a semi-structured interview which was conducted on 49 selected middle level managers of a Real Estate company in Abuja. The middle level managers were selected because they operate between the macro and the micro levels in the company, thereby acting as a channel in between and being in a better position to provide relevant information for the research under study. Prior to the interview date, the participants were contacted to remind them of the scheduled interview and time. The Constructive paradigm which mostly utilizes the qualitative approach such as interviews (either unstructured, structured, or semi-structured), observations, document analysis, etc., aided in providing an in-depth information from the respondents who tend to share their personal experiences and expressed their feelings towards the research under study, and this helps the researcher in constructing the reality from the information provided. The quality and quantity of data collected from the respondents determined the data saturation point, which is an occurrence when there exist no new or relevant perception regarding the class, and relationships between classes are well defined and validated (Strauss and Corbin, 2014).

Table 1: Designations of the Interview participants

| Designation | Number of Participants |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Administrative manager | 2 |
| Heads of Investment | 6 |
| Deputy heads of Investment | 6 |
| Team Leads (Investment Advisors) | 20 |
| Team Lead (Customer Care) | 10 |
| Quantity Surveyor | 5 |
| Total | 49 |

The collected data were transcribed and further imported into Atlas.ti software. Version 8.0 of ATLAS.ti was used in the analysis of the transcripts. Atlas.ti is a software program used to organize and manage unstructured data and store documents such as transcripts, pictures, video, and audio materials by coding the data, building concepts, and connecting them in networks (Friese, 2019). Open coding, Axial coding, and Selective coding were carried out in the coding process.

Grounded Theory Framework

Figure 1: Constructivist grounded theory (Source: Hussein, 2020).

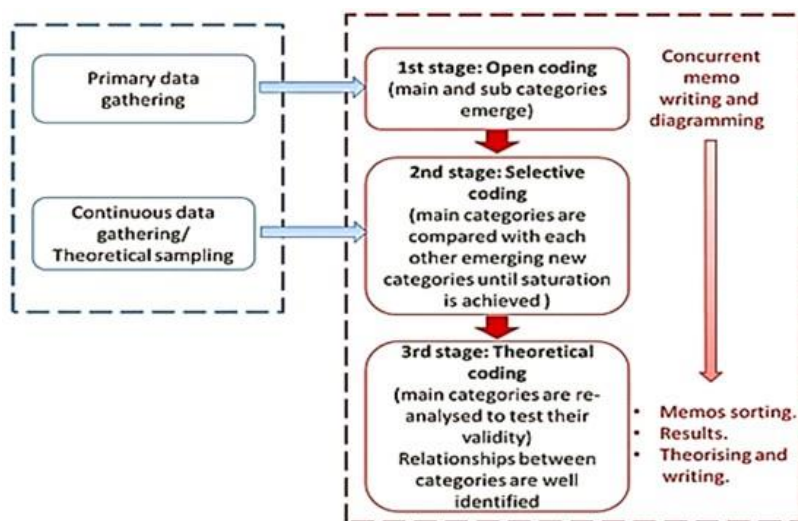


Figure 1 shows a breakdown of the different processes carried out in the research. Using the grounded theory approach allows the researcher to study the case study management challenges through theory building by collecting data, analyzing it, and letting themes emerge inductively, this approach allows the researcher to study and observe the respondents’ expressions and experiences and insights through their interactions, actions, and engagement (Kamarudin, 2017).

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The results revealed five themes which were pointed out by the respondents to pose a challenge in managing an ethnically diverse team. The first theme is clash of cultures, working as a team, individuals of diverse cultures tend to subconsciously exhibit traits which tend to clash with each other’s ethnic beliefs. In an ethnically diverse team, where individuals come from different ethnic backgrounds and orientations, their ways of life and perceptions to life tend to differ from another based on their unique ethnic groups as some individuals think of their beliefs as being superior to others’ beliefs, which tend to lead to cultural clash;

there have also been issues of diverse levels of reasoning either based on the individual’s exposure, orientation, culture or background, or what they perceive to be right or wrong; which poses as one of the major challenges to the manager. The second emerged theme is cliquishness, the respondents expressed that Individuals who share similarities in ethnic background or language tend to naturally gravitate towards each other, they form closeness or bond, some form cliques amongst themselves. This is because individuals who share similarities easily relate with each other and have a better understanding of each other based on their similar ethnic background or culture, which sometimes gives the minority group the feeling of inferiority or feeling of being sidelined. Cliquishness, closeness, bonds, or formation of smaller groups in an organization tend to further lead to tribalism, segregation, and sidelining of the other ethnic groups, which is the third emerged theme. This has high tendency of naturally affecting relationships amongst other staff, as it could psychologically affect individuals of the minority group, which could reflect in their job performance, therefore affecting their general input into the organizational productivity. This can be quite challenging for the HRM because they have a vital role to play in ensuring a positive organizational performance, as well as ensuring that they have inclusion policies and practices which promotes ethnic equality in the organization, but despite these policies and rules to curb issues of ethnic diversity in the workforce, the issues of tribalism, discrimination, and segregation still exist either directly or indirectly and this puts more pressure on them as it could be quite difficult to please everyone. The fourth theme is “feeling entitled”, the respondents expressed the issue of a particular ethnic group feeling superior to the other ethnic group, either because they are of the majority in the organization, or because the minority group hold a superior position in the organization, or a natural instinct with no basis, and exhibiting this mentality in the organization tends to affect their attitudes towards the minority ethnic group which brings about clash. It is understood that the entitled feeling exhibited by some set of individuals is usually traceable to their culture, where they feel superior to some certain ethnic groups or to a particular gender especially the female gender and this attitude can be challenging to manage for Team Lead or managers from the minority ethnic group in the company. The last theme is religion, the respondents portrayed religion as a challenging factor in managing an ethnically diverse workforce because some religions are predominant amongst some particular ethnic groups and some religious fanatics tend go to any extent in upholding their religious faith and beliefs regardless of the environment and organizational policies; and this tend to influence their behaviors and attitudes, the fact that religion and belief are considered sacred to most religious individuals and cannot be compromised regardless of the circumstance; it tends to influence the individuals’ sense of reasoning and mindset, the managers are thereby put in a position where they try to respect the employees’ beliefs and religion especially as regards the formation of organizational policies; and also uphold the organizational objectives.

Keywords, and phrases associated with different themes.

Table 2 presents the different keywords and phrases associated with the different emerged themes, as well as the keywords and phrases associated with the challenges faced in managing an ethnically diverse team. The extracted words are the exact words used by the respondents during the semi-structured interview.

Table 2: Keywords and phrases of some emerged themes

| Emergед themes | Keywords/Phrases |
|---------------------------|---|
| Cultural conflicts | <p>“Fighting”</p> <p>“Pointing a finger at somebody is like cursing the person”</p> <p>“The man is the head and whatever the man says is like...it is final”</p> <p>“You shouldn’t be expecting the kind of respect you want from your wife from me in the office because you are a man”.</p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Cliquishness</p> | <p>“People are drawn to people that they have something in common, and which is language”</p> <p>“You just see them in clusters, talking in their native language”</p> <p>“The fact that they are from the same place...”</p> <p>“You will gravitate towards people that you tend to share the same mutual, maybe love for something”</p> <p>“Whenever you are in any group, you want to add like your own personal people that are like close to you”</p> <p>“If you tend to speak, same language, there is that tendency that you people may tend to get along”</p> <p>“I did not understand that it was the easy communication or the fact that they are from the same place that started it”,</p> <p>“They speak the same language”</p> <p>“Some form stronger friendships with those from the same part as theirs”</p> <p>“They tend to be closer to you”,</p> <p>“Tell you more stuff and trust you more”</p> |
| <p>Tribalism, segregation, and sidelining</p> | <p>“Constantly speaking their language”</p> <p>“It was about me they were discussing”</p> <p>“The people that you are having personal issues are from the same language speaking part of the country”</p> <p>“High rate of tribalism”</p> <p>“Shade of segregation”</p> <p>“Eh, you are not Yoruba!”</p> <p>“Favor themselves”.</p> |
| <p>Feeling Entitled</p> | <p>“Feel entitled”</p> <p>“Is it because you are my boss?”</p> <p>“Who are you?”</p> <p>“I can own you!”</p> |

| | |
|----------|--|
| Religion | <p>“The major thing that influences us in Nigeria as youth is the religion”</p> <p>“My most challenging issue”</p> <p>“Handling this whole religion thing, the Christians, the Muslims”</p> <p>“They think differently”</p> <p>“It’s religion”</p> <p>“Even among the Christians, we are still divided”</p> <p>“I think that is the basic problem”</p> |
|----------|--|

Table 2 above presents the keywords and phrases related to the themes which were associated with the issues posing a challenge to the managers in the case study, highlighting the exact words used by the respondents in expressing themselves in relation to the different themes. These issues are classified in themes based on the similarities in the words and phrases deduced from the conducted interview. These themes are further discussed below:

Cultural Conflict: Some words and phrases used by the respondents such as “fighting” “pointing of finger” etc., were used to express themselves based on their understanding. These words were deduced and understood by the researcher to portray cultural conflict based on the researcher’s understanding of the study. These words may have different meanings in different contexts but in the context of the research under study, it is expressed as angry words and actions expressed by the respondents.

Cliquishness: The word “cliquishness” as used by the researcher is used to connote the meaning of the similar phrases and words used by the respondents in expressing themselves. During the interview, some statements were used by the respondents such as: “People are drawn to people that they have something in common, and which is language”, “You just see them in clusters, talking in their native language”, etc. these phrases were interpreted to be an act of cliquishness which shows that people who share similarities tend to gravitate towards each other, it could be similarities in language, culture, love for similar things, similar understanding of things or similar perceptions to things; thereby forming loyal cliques which tend to cause divisions amongst other groups.

Tribalism, segregation, and sidelining: This is a higher and more intense level of cliquishness, some phrases used in expression by some of the respondents depict tribalism, segregation and sidelining, phrases such as “the people that you are having personal issues are from the same language speaking part of the country”, as expressed by a respondent showed the act of segregation where people who share similarities like ethnic groups, language or culture segregate against other ethnic groups, thereby resulting to the statement made by the respondents. Another phrase used was “high rate of tribalism”, this phrase was used as a concluding impression based on diverse experiences and thoughts by the respondents. Other phrases such as “shade of segregation”, “favor themselves” etc., were also used by the respondents in expressing their feelings based on their experiences.

Feeling entitled: Some phrases such as “feeling entitled”, “is it because you are my boss?”, “who are you?”, “I can own you” which were used in expressions by the respondents were understood by the researcher to relate to the act of “feeling entitled” which was exhibited by some employees in the organization as cultural norms, thereby contributing to the challenges faced by the managers in managing these diversities.

Religion: Different words and phrases were used to express that religion poses an issue, this was expressed in different statements and phrases such as: “handling this whole religion thing, the Christians, the

Muslims”, “they think differently”, “even among the Christians, we are still divided”, “I think that is the basic problem” etc. The respondents used these phrases in expressing their thoughts about religion in the organization; and the division that exists even amongst individuals who share the same religion; and understanding that the organization also has different individuals from different religious backgrounds, adds to the challenges faced by the managers to maintain social cohesion and unity amongst the employees in the organization.

Word Cloud of Keywords and Phrases associated with challenges faced by the managers.

Figure 2 presents the exact words extracted from the interviews which were conducted on the middle level managers. These words are associated with the challenges faced by the managers in managing ethnically diverse teams.

Figure 2: Word Cloud presenting the keywords and phrases which depicts the challenges faced in managing an ethnically diverse team.



Figure 2 portrays the exact words used by the managers, pointing out the challenges faced in managing an ethnically diverse team. Some words like “different”, “challenging”, “fighting”, “tribalism”, “segregation”, “upbringings”, “personalities”, “reasoning”, “rebuff”, etc. These words portray the expressions of the managers as they expressed the challenges they face in managing the ethnically diverse team because in ethnically diverse teams, there are different personalities with different backgrounds and upbringings who possess different levels of reasoning as well as different levels in processing information, these differences in ethnicity tend to lead to cultural conflicts which results to fighting, discrimination, tribalism or segregation of the minority groups, thereby posing a challenge to the managers.

At the end of the day, it is understood that each individual has different ways of interpreting ethnicity and general issues because different individuals have their unique backgrounds, personalities, feelings and how they respond to diverse issues, which create more challenging situations, thereby contributing to the challenges faced by the managers in managing them. Basically, it was understood that managing human beings generally is not an easy task.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This research provides a view of an ethnically diverse organization with individuals from different cultures, backgrounds, beliefs, and values; working as a team, displaying their unique characteristics which tend to clash with another’s culture and beliefs, hereby posing as a challenge in managing its differences. Managing an ethnic workforce has not been an easy task as it entails a lot especially in dealing with the diverse ethnic differences (Akinnusi, et al 2017; Lorette, 2013); it can also be challenging in scenarios where a “tribalistic” clients are expected be given preferential treatments because of their importance in the organizational growth, as also in tribalistic organizations where ethnic equality is expected to be ensured.

It is important to note that the managers who are usually seen as the top leaders in the organizations, also go through challenges of managing the ethnically diverse team, therefore it important for the employees to understand the importance of an ethnically diverse team and appreciate the individual differences, the diverse employee should consciously curb their excess personal cultural attributes which have the tendency of interfering with the organizational policies, so as the enhance the positive productivity of the organization, whilst reducing the challenges faced by the ethnic diversity managers.

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