WORKPLACE CONFLICT FACTORS AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

Asikhia, Olalekan U[1]., Akpa, Victoria O[2]., Makinde, Olubisi G[3]., Fesobi, Oluwaseun A[4]

[1, 2, 3, 4] Department of Business Administration and Marketing, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State
NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

There has been a growing concern amongst researchers on how to address the challenges of limited access, inability to compete globally, poor institutional branding, and issues of customer loyalty arising in private universities in Nigeria. These challenges are attributed to low commitment of employees which is possibly caused by workplace conflict factors. Research on commitment in the education sector particularly private universities in Nigeria is limited and the results of the few studies already concluded are divergent thus creating a need for further investigation. Consequently, this study examined the effect of workplace conflict factors on commitment in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. The population comprised 2,533 academic staff of seven selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. Sample size was 468 academic staff determined using Raosoft calculator. The study employed survey research design and adopted multi-sampling technique. A validated questionnaire was used to collect data. The response rate was 75.6%. Data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM). On the whole, the results revealed that workplace conflict factors had positive and significant effect on commitment of employees in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria (Adj. R^2 = 0.324, GFI = 0.86, CFI = 0.92, p < 0.05). The findings further revealed that rewards (β = 0.278, t = 2.614, p = 0.009) and communication (β = 0.431, t = 4.111, p = 0.000) had positive and significant effect on the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. Personality (β = 0.113, t = 1.559, p = 0.119) and leadership style (β = 0.087, t = 1.287, p = 0.198) had a positive but insignificant effect on commitment of the employees while work environment (β = -0.234, t = -1.822, p = 0.069), had a negative insignificant effect on commitment of employees in the selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Keywords: Commitment, Communication, Leadership style, Rewards, Workplace conflict factors.

INTRODUCTION

Private universities in Nigeria have over the years become more popular in the Nigerian education sector following the inability of public higher education to meet up with the responsibility of providing quality education to most Nigerian youths. However, these universities are faced with a number of challenges arising from low commitment of academic employees. Bashir and Gani (2020) emphasised that addressing problems of limited access, global competition, institutional branding, and customer loyalty in private universities in Nigeria, requires committed employees to resolve because universities depend on committed teachers to create and sustain competitive advantage as well as achieve superior performance. Fako., Nkhukhu-Orlando, Wilson, Forcheh, and Lin (2018) espoused that highly committed academic

staff are the mainstay of universities as they play an important role in the success of their institutions. According to Bashir and Gani (2020) highly committed employees have an unquestionably constructive effect on organisation; they wish to remain associated with the organisation and are less likely to leave. Since highly committed academic staff play an important role in the success of any tertiary institution (Ahmad, Bibi, & Majid, 2017), managers and decision makers of higher education institutions seeking competitive advantage need to understand the organisational commitment of academic employees to their universities and the factors associated with such commitment (Fako et al., 2018). Workplace conflict factors are possibly some of the factors that influence commitment of employees, however, there is a paucity of literature on workplace conflict factors and commitment in private universities in Nigeria. Hence, this study investigated the effect of workplace conflict factors on employee commitment in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW
This section focused on workplace conflict factors (personality, rewards, work environment, leadership style and communication) and commitment.

2.1 Workplace Conflict Factors
Workplace conflict is the interactive social process arising from tensions between two or more people due to actual or perceived differences in ideas or values (Wall and Callister, 1995). Workplace conflict otherwise referred to also as organisational conflict according to Wikipedia is caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between people working together. Workplace conflict is viewed as friction whether physical, emotional, or psychological that exists within the workplace between two or more persons working together to achieve set organisational goals and objectives that can produce stress and strain in relationships when not properly managed. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) expressed conflict as a struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive those incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others are preventing them from achieving their goals. Okuntade (2014) on the other hand revealed that conflict can also be described as an occasion where an individual or group feels negatively affected by another individual or group. There are various perceptions regarding conflicts, it is a reality in everyone's life and should be considered a natural process that occurs daily (Omisore & Abiodun 2014). Conflict cannot cease to exist as they are intrinsic to human beings, forming an integral part of their moral and emotional growth (Valente, Lourenço & Németh, 2020). Conflict is characterised by the fact that it is a natural occurrence normal in everyday life and the workplace. Hossain (2017) also affirms that workplace conflict can be personality or style differences and personal problems such as substance abuse, childcare issues, and family problems adding that organisational factors such as leadership, management, budget, and disagreement about core values can also contribute to creating conflict. Nwokorie (2017) opined that conflict causatives give rise to conflict behaviours such as low level of employee job commitment that further develop outcomes such as poor service quality and negative customer satisfaction. Workplace conflict factors are therefore those factors within the workplace capable of triggering negative reactions and attitudes in employees of an organisation that lead to discord when not properly addressed. These factors include personality, rewards, work environment, leadership style and communication.

Personality has been defined in different ways by various authors from diverse perspectives. One of such widely used definitions is by Allport (1961) who defined personality as the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thought. Alsuwailem and Elnaga (2016) opined that personality encompasses a person's relatively stable feelings, thoughts, and behavioural patterns while to Gupta and Gupta (2020), personality of a person helps him to react, perceive, think about the stimuli, and makes the person's attitude or behaviour towards the environment. Personality thus refers to those distinctive features particular to an individual which includes the person's way of thinking, behaviour, emotions, attitude, and responses.

Rewards include intrinsic and incentive types like promotions, re-assignment, and non-monetary bonuses (James et al., 2015). Providing rewards to employees is one of the mechanisms to encourage employee to achieve the organisational goals (Alfagira, Zumrah, Noor, & Rahman, 2017; Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2006). According to Myint and War (2020) there are two categories of reward; financial rewards, tangible, and they relate to pay as well as the benefits that an organisation provides to its employees and non-financial rewards; rewards which focus on motivating employee as well as enhancing job engagement and commitment. Describing the characteristics of rewards, Yamoah (2013) revealed that a reward system consists of financial rewards and employee benefits, which is commonly called total remuneration; it is the reward system that outlines the pay levels, pay structure, base pay, employee benefits and all non-financial rewards. Consequently, reward is defined as the recompense made (in cash and/or kind) to an employee for an agreed task performed in the institution or organization to encourage the continued performance of such task for the benefit of the organisation.

Workplace environment can be characterized as the area where an errand or task is accomplished (Awan & Tahir, 2015). According to Alfagira et al. (2017), relationship with colleagues, relationship with supervisor, facilities of the university, working conditions are examples of work environment. The kind of work environment in place in an organization influences the calibre of employees who are going to be attracted, how they will behave, how well they will perform and how long they will stay in the organization (Nzewi, Arachie, Ibrahim, & Okoli, 2018). Work environment is described in this study as the settings, conditions, atmosphere, and structures (physical and otherwise) within which an employee (academic staff) executes given task(s) that could influence the employee to act positively or negatively in the execution of the given task(s).

Leadership is a process of the organisation which aims to influence others for strong commitment towards the organisation by realizing their potential to add value to organisational productivity, share their vision, integrity, and passion (Mitonga-Monga, Coetzee, & Cilliers, 2012). Leadership styles is the leading way of a manager in running an organisation to achieve organisational objectives (Kasyadi & Virgana, 2021). Similarly, Omole (2020) opined that leadership styles are the various styles adopted by organizations in order to achieve their goals and objectives. Leadership style should not be ignored; indeed, it is a powerful explanatory factor of employee outcomes (Kesari & Verma, 2018). Leaders play an active role in developing bonding with employees and this bonding support in establishing stronger connection with the organisations (Sheraz, 2020). A review of related literatures revealed that moral qualities of the leaders in the shape of ethical leadership have positively influenced employee commitment,

social exchange and the trust-based relation which supports the positive outcomes of employees (Hansen, Alge, Brown, Jackson, & Dunford, 2013; Loi, Lam, Ngo, & Cheong, 2015; Sheraz, 2020). Ethical leadership (EL) is about honesty, fair decision-making, and ethical behaviour of the leader in personal and professional life (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison, 2005). Leadership style is viewed in this study as the attitude and/or approaches of a leader towards his subordinates or employees that enhance or impede positive employee outcomes.

The concept of communication, just like any other terms in social sciences, does not have a generally accepted definition; it is a generic term which tends to assume a plethora of meanings (Adekeye, 2012). Communication refers to the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another (Gangadhara & Rao, 1996). Communication or communicator's role has a significant position for companies in implementing a compelling change message (Lewis, 2000; Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). Communication makes possible the transmission of meanings and the sharing of experiences, feeling, intentions, decisions, ideas, attitudes, and information in an organisational setting with a view to achieve the set goals and objectives; it is what keeps organisation members together as they interact to achieve pre-selected or predetermined objectives (Adekeye, 2012). According to Pratama (2020), communication is the process of sending or exchanging information to others directly or using the media so that the person can act, in accordance with the purpose of the message. Unless organizational communication strategies are designed in such a way that they enhance organizational commitment and job satisfaction, the objectives and goals of the organization cannot be adequately achieved (Nzitunga, 2016).

2.2 Commitment
Commitment has been hypothesized as a multilateral concept (Sultana, Syed, & Riaz, 2021). It has been conceptualized by different scholars, which present a view that there is no consensus regarding the connotation of the term (Arora, Nuseir, Nusair, & Arora, 2012; Basir & Gani, 2020; Lee & Jameil, 2003). According to Wiener (1982), to behave in a way which meets organisational goals and interests is organisational commitment. Meyer and Hersovitch (2001), view commitment as a force that binds an individual to a course of action that is of relevance to a particular target. Organisational commitment for university teachers can be the acceptance of university norms and objectives and their wish to be on the team of the university and perform their duties in the best interest of the university (Nawab & Bhatti, 2011). Luo, Guo, Lu, and Chen (2018) perceive organisational commitment as the general emotional response of employees to the organisation as a whole, which is usually expressed as an emotional dependence of employees on the organisation.

According to Allen and Meyer (1990) common to all the conceptualizations of commitment found in the literature is a link with turnover; employees who are strongly committed are those who are least likely to leave the organisation. Commitment is therefore described as the willful bond of the employee to the organisation through the utilization of personal resources (physical, mental, emotional) to facilitate the attainment of set organisational goals and objectives.

2.3 Theoretical Framework
This study is situated in the social exchange theory (SET) which is a broad conceptual paradigm that spans many social scientific disciplines, such as management, social psychology, and

anthropology (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Social exchange theory is a distinct approach that emerged in sociology and social psychology over the decades and according to Emerson (1976), four figures were largely responsible for the emergence of this theory. They are, George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelly, and Peter Blau. Social exchange theory is not a single theory but is better understood as a family of conceptual models as posited by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005). However, common to all social exchange theories is the fact that all SETs treat social life as involving a series of sequential transactions between two or more parties as concluded by Mitchell, Cropanzano, and Quisenberry (2012). Within contemporary management research, the aspect of SET that has garnered by far the most research attention has been the notion of workplace relationships (Shore, Tetrick, & Barksdale, 1999; Shore et al., 2004 cited in Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the opinion of Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), the social exchange relationship is a mediator or intervening variable: advantageous and fair transactions between strong relationships, and these relationships produce effective work behaviour and positive employee attitudes. They stated the central "essence" of SET to be, a social exchange which comprises actions contingent on the rewarding reactions of others, which over time provide for mutually and rewarding transactions and relationships. As postulated by Norwood (2018), social exchange helps to explain exchange relationships, and why individuals behave the way they do.

Criticizing the social exchange theory, Zafirovski (2005), explains that Social exchange theory's treatment of the relationship between restricted or bilateral and generalized or multilateral exchanges seems inadequate, even contradictory. Explaining further, he said despite its claim to be a sociological paradigm, exchange theory in its rational choice and behavioural varieties fails to recognize the distinctive social character of exchanges that are not fully reducible to their particular economic and/or psychological dimensions. Another criticism of the theory is that the theory does not address the role of altruism in determining relationship outcomes which implies people do not always act in self-interested ways (i.e., maximizing rewards and minimizing costs).

However, supporting the social exchange theory (SET), Tekleab and Chiaburu (2011) empirically confirmed the distinctiveness of social exchanges in content and focus, mitigating researchers' concerns about possible construct redundancy while Omayo and Mbatha (2018) affirm that the social exchange theory is humanistic in nature and thus applicable in actual human relationships as it makes it possible to understand the concept of relationships, how they develop and are terminated. In the same vein, Sheraz (2020) highlighted that in social exchange there is trust, time investment and strong bonding, and the two parties are not formally obliged to return a benefit to the other. Therefore, where employees (academic staff) enjoy cordial relationships with colleagues, receive adequate reward for a job done, work in a conducive environment, receive support from leaders and management that are ethical in approach and also have access to give and receive information through effective communication, they are likely to reciprocate by exhibiting high level of commitment. Furthermore, in a situation where conflict arises between employees due to any of the conflict factors proposed in this study, resolving it quickly and showing that value is placed on employee comfort and happiness by addressing such issues is expected to be reciprocated by positive outcomes such as high level of commitment from the employees that further reiterates the concept of reciprocal exchange which is a major assumption of SET.

METHODOLOGY
This study adopted survey research design. The study population comprised 2,533 academic staff of seven selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. A sample size of 468 participant was obtained using the Raosoft sample size calculator. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for the selection of private universities in the Southwest, while snowball sampling technique was adopted for the selection of the respondents in the selected universities. Data for the study were collected using an adapted, validated and structured questionnaire with Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient ranging from 0.613 to 0.864. The data collected was analysed using structural equation modelling analysis.

Model Specification
$Y = f(X)$
$X = (x1, x2, x3, x4, x5)$
$Y = f(x1, x2, x3, x4, x5)$
Where: X = Workplace conflict factors (WCF)
 Y = Commitment (CMT)
 x_1 = Personality (PSN), x_2 = Rewards (RWD), x_3 = Work Environment (WKE), x_4 = Leadership style (LDS), x_5 = Communication (COM), ei = Error or stochastic term

Functional Relationship
$CMT = \beta0 + \beta1x1 + \beta2x2 + \beta3x3 + \beta4x4 + \beta5x5 + ei$ ……………………….……… Equ. (1)
$CMT = \beta0 + \beta1PSN + \beta2RWD + \beta3WKE + \beta4LDS + \beta5COM + ei$ …………….……Equ. (2)

RESULTS
Prior to analysing the data obtained for the study, it was checked that the data did not violate the assumptions of multivariate analysis (SEM). The checks included adequacy of sample size, test for linearity, normality, heteroscedasticity, multicollinearity and detection and treatment of outliers. Confirmatory factor analysis of the study variables was done after which the SEM analysis was done in line with the study hypothesis which states that workplace conflict factors have no significant effect on employee commitment in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. Data was analysed using IBM SPSS version 28 and AMOS 28 software and the results are contained in Table 1.

Table 1: **Summary of Regression Weights for Workplace conflict factors and Commitment**

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Commitment	<---	Persnlty	0.113	0.151	1.559	0.119
Commitment	<---	Rewrds	0.278	0.159	2.614	0.009
Commitment	<---	WorkEnv	-0.234	0.162	-1.822	0.069
Commitment	<---	LeadStyle	0.087	0.098	1.287	0.198
Commitment	<---	Communtns	0.431	0.165	4.111	***

*** indicates p = 0.000
Source: Field Survey (2022)

4.1 Interpretation of Findings
Table 1. shows the SEM regression analysis for the effect of workplace conflict factors (personality, rewards, work environment, leadership style and communication) on employee commitment in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. The results revealed that

rewards (β = 0.278, t = 2.614, p = 0.009) and communication (β = 0.431, t = 4.111, p = 0.000) had a positive significant effect on the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. On the other hand, personality (β = 0.113, t =1.559, p = 0.119) and leadership style (β = 0.087, t =1.287, p = 0.198) had a positive but insignificant effect on the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest while work environment (β = -0.234, t = -1.822, p = 0.069), had a negative insignificant effect on commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. The adjusted R^2 indicates that workplace conflict factors (personality, rewards, work environment, leadership style and communication) accounted for 32.4% of the variances in commitment of employees of the selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. It indicated that by putting all the constructs together there is a tendency of influencing 32.4% change in the commitment of employees of the selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. The remaining unexplained 67.6% variance could be attributed to factors that were not considered in this study model. The overall model fit of the path was determined by the fit indices such as, RMSEA, SRMR and CFI values. From the structural model, Goodness of Fit were: CMIN = 861.34, CMIN/DF= 2.081, GFI= 0.858, CFI= 0.919, RMSEA = 0.055, SRMR= 0.0546, Pclose = 0.046. The structural regression model from the findings as revealed in Table 1 is expressed as follows:

$$CMT = \beta0 + 0.278RWD + 0.431COM + ei \dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots\text{ Equ. 3}$$
Where:
CMT = Commitment
RWD = Rewards
COM = Communication

The regression model above revealed that a unit change in reward would cause 0.278 improvement in the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. Also, unit change in communication would lead to 0.431improvement in the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. The results of structural path analysis revealed that workplace conflict factors have significant effect on the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria as the t-value for the variables was greater than 1.96 standard value at 5% significant level which is the decision rule for this study with the p-values (P < 0.05). Accordingly, the hypothesis which states that workplace conflict factors have no significant effect on employee commitment in selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria is rejected.
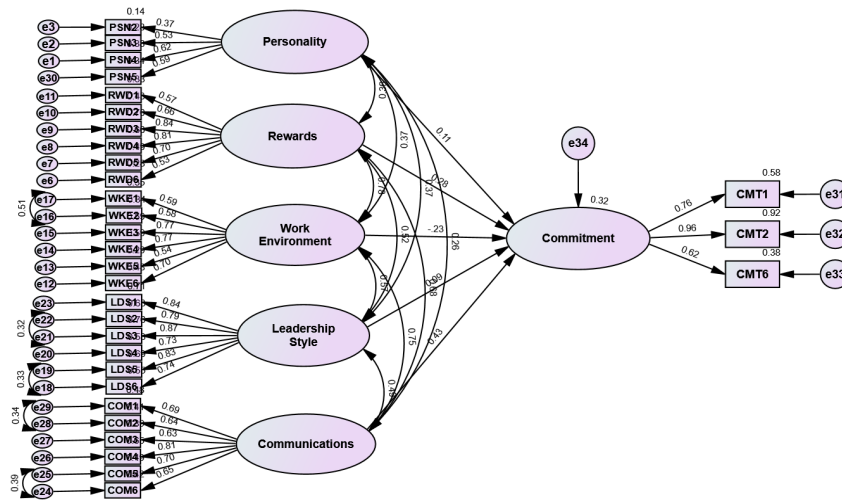
CMIN = 861.34, CMIN/DF = 2.081, GFI = 0.858, CFI = 0.919, RMSEA = 0.055, SRMR = 0.0546, Pclose = 0.046
Figure 1 SEM Structural Path Coefficients – Workplace Conflict Factors and Commitment
Source: Researcher's Field Survey Results (2022)

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The results of full structural equation modelling for the workplace conflict factors on commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria revealed that workplace conflict factors had significant effect on commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria (Adj. R^2 = 0.324; GFI = 0.858, CFI = 0.919, Pclose = 0.046, p < 0.05). These findings indicated that workplace conflict factors are significant predictors of the commitment of employees of selected private universities in Southwest Nigeria. This means that workplace conflict factors improve commitment of academic staff of private universities and by implication help to address the challenges of limited access, inability to compete globally, poor institutional branding, and issues of customer loyalty arising in private universities in Nigeria. This result find support in the study of Putra and Prasetya (2018) which revealed that reward has a significant influence on organisational commitment while workplace environment has a insignificant influence on organisational commitment. Also, the study of Jiang et al. (2018) revealed that job and organisational variables of perceived dangerousness of the job, job variety, supervision, instrumental communication, and decentralization explained 54% of the variance in organisational commitment. The assertion by Nzitunga (2016) that communication is undoubtedly the most critical dynamic in keeping employees committed to the organization and satisfied in their work is also confirmed by the findings of this study. The findings of the study by Sheraz (2020) that ethical leadership is positively associated with commitment of employees was supported to an extent but the effect was insignificant in this study. Additionally, the results suggests that rewards (receiving good pay, opportunity for advancement, opportunity to acquire new skills) enhance the commitment of academic staff in private universities. This aligns with the findings of Joe-Akunne and Ezeh (2019) who studied private sector workers and concluded that satisfaction with pay increases employees' commitment in an organization. Also, the study by Fako et al. (2018) revealed that academic staff perception of opportunities for research predicted their commitment to the university.

However, the study failed to support the assertion by Miedaner et al. (2018) that differences in employee's commitment can be largely explained by his or her individual characteristics and work experiences although individual support by leaders and colleagues was shown to influence organisational commitment. It was also not in agreement with the study of Mayowa-Adebara, and Aina (2016) which concluded that there was a positive relationship between work environment and organizational commitment. The contrary view in this study could be because the respondents in the study (academic staff) are satisfied with the leadership style exhibited by leaders in their institutions and possibly their work environment at the time of the study did not have much effect on them and does not define their commitment level to the university.

Anchoring the findings on the social exchange theory (SET), it can be deduced that academic staff otherwise referred to as lecturers, faculty and teachers are engaged in an exchange relationship based on reciprocity as asserted by Bashir and Gani (2020) who stated that teachers and the universities are engaged in a give and take relationship and when teachers perceive high organisational engagement, they respond with a greater commitment, perceiving them as an integral part of the organisation. This alludes to the popular saying of one good turn deserves another. It is simply logical to understand and accept that as social beings when academic staff receive good rewards for their services, they are bound to be more committed to their job. Likewise, when they are carried along in the scheme of things in the university through adequate, effective and efficient communication that gives them a sense of belonging and relevance in the university system, they are most likely to exhibit a high level of commitment not only to their job but to the university as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that workplace conflict factors had a positive and significant effect on employee commitment in selected private universities is Southwest Nigeria. This implies that workplace conflict factors enhance commitment of academic employees in private universities and by extension help to reduce the challenges of limited access, inability to compete globally, poor institutional branding, and issues of customer loyalty arising in private universities in Nigeria. The findings further revealed that rewards and communication had positive and significant effect on employee commitment. Personality and leadership style had a positive but insignificant effect on employee commitment in private universities in Nigeria while work environment had a negative and insignificant effect on employee commitment in private universities in Nigeria. Consequently, there is need to pay adequate attention to workplace conflict factors in private universities in Nigeria to achieve optimum employee commitment which is crucial for the attainment of the goals and objective of the various institutions. The following recommendations are made based on the findings and conclusions of this study:

i.   The management and administrators of private university should channel their effort to addressing all issues centred on workplace conflict factors in their institutions and ensure that these factors do not give rise to a conflict situation in their institutions through negligence.

ii. The reward of academic staff should be addressed to ensure that they are adequately rewarded both in cash and kind. In particular, academic staff should receive good pay, be provided with opportunity for advancement and acquisition of new skills and more importantly the security of their jobs should be guaranteed.

iii. There should effective and efficient communication within the university system that provides academic staff with adequate information on their evaluation, information on the university's goals and financial standing of the university. Timely receipt of information needed by academic staff to do their job should also be ensured. Meetings should be properly organized and there should be clarity and concreteness of written memos/ reports to avoid conflict situations. This will give the employees a sense of belonging that increases commitment.

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