

# Role of Trade Unions in the Enhancement of Peaceful Work Relations for Efficient Conflict Management in Public Universities in Kenya

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**Abstract:** *Disagreements are always an inevitable part of organizational life. Labour conflicts can be regarded as disputes that occur when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups within a workplace are unharmonious with each other. The institutions of higher learning in Kenya are experiencing a lot of conflicts which are mostly left unresolved. Conflicts between individual workers/employees and also between workers and management have escalated. Labour conflicts leads to cases of frequent strikes, lock ups and any other forms of unrest as seen in our Universities. Proper management of conflicts however deserves special and adequate consideration in harmonizing workplace relations. This study aimed to establish the role of trade unions in managing conflicts in institutions of higher learning by enhancing of peaceful work relations. The study was based in Moi University since it one of the oldest and largest universities in Kenya. The target population of the study encompassed all the 683 employees in the university who were registered members of different trade unions. Stratified sampling was used to divide the population into three categories thus Lecturers, Middle grade staff and junior staff. 205 respondents were selected purposively for the study. Secondary data was obtained from existing literature and university documents while primary data was collected from the respondents using questionnaires. According to the results, 80% of the respondents confirmed that trade unions in their workplace use the role of labour relations in conflict management. In relation to whether job specification is clearly drawn to ensure peaceful work relations, 64.8% of the respondents agreed while 17.1% disagreed. The respondents were additionally asked whether existence of harmonious work relations leads to high productivity among workers. 94.2% of the respondents agreed that high productivity is achieved when harmonious relations exist among the workers. In regard to whether trade unions encourage consultations among their members as a way of creating harmonious work relations, 82.5% of the respondents agreed while only 0.5% disagreed. The study recommends that trade unions jointly with management should maintain continual negotiations with the employers to avoid employee-employer conflicts. Collective bargaining should be promoted as a tool with which employers and employees are able to negotiate on matters affecting the work place.*

**Keywords:** Trade Unions, Peaceful Work Relations, Conflict Management, Public Universities

## 1. Introduction

Trade unions are a major constituent of the modern industrial system in any country, each having their own set of goals to achieve according to their constitution and each having its own strategy to reach those goals (Cohen, 2004). A trade union commonly known as a labour union is an organization of workers who have come together to achieve common goals such as protecting the integrity of its trade, improving safety standards, achieving higher pay and benefits such as health care and retirement, increasing the number of employees an employer assigns to complete the work, and better working conditions (Meardi, 2000). It is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of sustaining and enhancing conditions in the workplace (Hyman, 2001). Basically, a trade union fights for better working conditions and remuneration for its members (Taylor & Bain, 2001). They advocate for sound relations between employers and employees through the promotion and protection of freedom of association, collective bargaining agreements and dispute resolution (Gallin, 2001). More specifically, trade unions negotiate for wages, work rules, complaint procedures, rules governing hiring, firing and promotion of workers, benefits, workplace safety and policies (Deakin & Morris, 2012). In developing countries, the right to form a union and bargain collectively protects workers from exploitative and abusive conditions at work and puts pressure on employers to share productivity gains with their employees.

The recent upsurge in trade union action has been encouraging. This surge has essentially been instigated by the contemporary changes in the political, social and educational environs regarding awareness of rights of employees – such as the right to organize, the right to negotiate, and the right to settle terms and conditions of employment (Phelan, 2007; Fairbrother, 2008). This understanding of rights has caused worker unions to spring up to protect, guard and foster workers' interests. The outcomes have been evinced some which include with the establishment of minimum wages, norms for mandatory work hours, provisions for health and safety, and overall improvements in working conditions. It's evident that unionization has become instrumental in improving the quality of life of workers (Singh & Kulkarni, 2013; Barrientos Smith, 2007).

The upsurge of trade unionism hasn't come without its fair share of negativity. Most governments and employees associate trade unions with workers strikes, slow-downs, or work stoppages especially in developing countries (Hyman, 2007). Though in trade unions protects workers from exploitative and abusive conditions at work, in most of these developing countries employers to view trade unionism as an undesirable intervention in the smooth functioning of organizations without realizing the positive contribution it could make towards industrial peace, harmony and progress (Levinson, 2013). Employers often allege that labor unions, only talk about workers' rights and ignore their obligations (Compa, 2004). They believe that unions are largely

responsible for low productivity and poor performance of enterprise firms. According to Olson (2009), employers consider trade unions as organizations only striving to secure benefits for their members, such as financial gains like raise of wages, bonuses, various allowances insurance benefits, overtime payment and non-financial benefits such as job security, comfortable work places, and recreational facilities and decreasing fear of employer through collective bargaining. In contrast, unions also have beyond collective bargaining, roles such as role in increasing workers' productivity or efficiency, improvement of workers discipline, improvement of workplace peace and harmony and participating in decision making with management (Addison and Schnabel, 2003).

Disagreements are always an inevitable part of organizational life (Jones and Gorge, 2000). Labour conflicts can be regarded as disputes that occur when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups within a workplace are unharmonious with each other (Henry, 2009). People who value independence tend to resist the need for interdependence and, to some extent, conformity within a group. People who seek power struggle with others for position or status within the group.

While conflicts are recurrently perceived as a dysfunctionality in an organization, they can also be advantageous because they can act as indirect catalysts for creation of harmonious work environment. Conflicts have both positive and negative effects (Jones and Gorge, 2000). They can be constructive when they encourage creativity, new looks at old conditions, the clarification of points of view, and the development of human capabilities to handle interpersonal differences (Landry, 2008; Keane, 2013). Conflicts turn negative when they create resistance to change, establish may hemin labour or interpersonal relations, fosters distrust, builds a feeling of defeat, or widens the chasm of misunderstanding (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Keane, 2013).

The institutions of higher learning are always experiencing a lot of conflicts which are mostly left unresolved. The frequency of go-slows, strikes, and riots in public universities in Africa has increased tremendously in the past decade to such an extent that students cannot tell when their studies would end because of frequent closures resulting from either or a combination of the three events. In the past, conflicts only existed between the students and the university management. However, presently, conflicts between individual workers/employees and also between workers and management have escalated. These conflicts arise as a result of demands for increased pay, better working environment, equity distribution of resources, motivation, good industrial environment. Labour conflicts leads to cases of frequent strikes, lock ups and any other forms of unrest as seen in our Universities. Proper management of conflicts however deserves special and adequate consideration in harmonizing workplace relations. Ramsbotham *et al.* (2011) assert that conflict resolution can occur in four ways. First, it can occur through tolerance. Secondly, it can occur through avoidance. Thirdly, it can occur through restriction. Finally, it can occur through treatment which involves enhancement of peaceful co-

existence. This method encompasses team building, objective discussions concerning the conflict, involvement of the aggressor in the conflict resolution, and role-playing (Mayer, 2004).

This study thus aimed to establish the role of trade unions in managing conflicts in institutions of higher learning by enhancing of peaceful work relations. The study was based in Moi University since it one of the oldest and largest universities in Kenya.

## 2. Study Methodology

The study was carried out in Moi University which is one of the seven fully fledged universities in Kenya. It was established in 1984 by the Moi University Act of Parliament after recommendations from the Mackay Commission. It is located in Eldoret which is 310 kilometers northwest of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Specifically, it is situated in Kesses area, in Uasin Gishu County. It was the second public university to be established in Kenya, after the University of Nairobi.

The University currently operates seven (4) campuses in Kenya namely main campus, Eldoret west campus, Odera Akang'o campus and Town campus. In addition, it has two (2) constituent colleges namely Garissa University College and Rongo University College. The following trade unions exist in Moi University; Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) whose membership is drawn from Lecturers, University Non-Teaching Staff Union (UNTESU) with members drawn from the middle grade staff and Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) whose members are the junior staff.

The target population of the study encompassed all the 683 employees in the university who were registered members of different trade unions. 30% of the targeted population was chosen to get a sample size of 205 employees. Stratified sampling was used to divide the population into three categories thus Lecturers, Middle grade staff and junior staff and 30% from every stratum were selected purposively for the study.

The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was obtained from existing literature and university documents while primary data was collected from the respondents using questionnaires. The questions adopted the likert scale which facilitated quick collection of data from the respondents. The data was analyzed using inferential and descriptive statistics. In addition, the information was presented in form of tables and figures.

## 3. Results and Discussions

The study sought to find out from the respondents the role of peaceful work relations on conflict management. The objective was to prove whether trade unions advocate for harmonious work relations among the workers in Moi University. This was tested using results obtained from the questionnaires, which were shown on table 1 below.

**Table 1: Role of work relations on conflict management**

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	N	Mean
1) Trade unions effectively use role of labour relations in conflict management.	48 (23.4%)	116 (56.6%)	25 (12.2%)	16 (7.8%)	0	205	3.95
2) Every employee job specification is clearly drawn to ensure labour relations management	55 (26.8%)	78 (38%)	37 (18%)	25 (12.2%)	10 (4.9%)	205	3.69
3) Trade unions communicate what they expect from their members in terms of work in labour relations management	44 (21.5%)	94 (45.9%)	28 (13.7%)	37 (18%)	2 (1%)	205	3.68
4) Existence of harmonious work relations leads to high productivity among workers.	107 (52.2%)	86 (42%)	8 (3.9%)	4 (2%)	0	205	4.44
5) Trade unions encourage consultations among their members in labour relations management	85 (41.5%)	84 (41%)	23 (11.2%)	12 (5.9%)	1 (0.5%)	205	4.17

According to the results above, 80% of the respondents confirmed that trade unions in their workplace use the role of labour relations in conflict management. Only 7.8% of the respondents said the effectiveness is not exploited effectively.

In relation to whether job specification is clearly drawn to ensure peaceful work relations, 64.8% of the respondents agreed while 17.1% disagreed. As regards to whether trade unions communicate what they expect from their members in terms of work relations, 67.4% of the respondents agreed while 19% disagreed. This shows that trade unions endeavor to clearly specify job requirements to their members in an effort of ensuring peaceful work relations.

The respondents were additionally asked whether existence of harmonious work relations leads to high productivity among workers. 94.2% of the respondents agreed that high productivity is achieved when harmonious relations exist among the workers. Trade Unions balance the power relationship between workers and managers and limit employers' arbitrary, exploitative or retaliatory behaviour by establishing grievance and arbitration procedures, they reduce turnover and promote stability in the work force and create conditions that cause an overall improvement in industrial relations which lead to workers' productivity.

In regard to whether trade unions encourage consultations among their members as a way of creating harmonious work relations, 82.5% of the respondents agreed while only 0.5% disagreed. Unions make routine endeavors to know conditions of employment from their members, and then organize forums to articulate the collective views, interests, and opinions gathered.

The results from the respondents became apparent that trade unions use the role of labour relations to manage conflicts in Moi University. This was in agreement with a research done by Floyd & Lane (2000) who conducted a research on managing role conflict in strategic renewal perspective. Their results indicated that in a place of work where there are no negotiations and mediations, it is unlikely to find good industrial relations. Most conflicts can simply be solved by appropriate negotiations between the parties. This strategy requires skill on the part of the negotiator and careful planning before engaging in negotiation. The process of negotiation involves an open discussion on problem solutions and the outcome is often an exchange which works towards a mutually acceptable solution.

The results showed a strong link between harmonious work relations and high productivity among workers. This finding was in agreement with those of Guthrie (2000), that conflicts are a strong catalyst to job dissatisfaction which in turn causes productivity to decline in any given organization. This means that for enhancement of firm's performance, conflicts should be kept minimal in any organization.

The results further disclosed that some employees suppress their issues because of fear of victimization by the employer who more often than not may use the situation as an advantage to lock out or dismiss any employee who becomes vocal. The employer also uses monetary promises and privileges like promotions to compromise the union leadership who instead remain silent in articulating the issues affecting workers. Thus most employees only pretend that harmonious work relations prevail in the university in order not to put their jobs at stake. But again, trade unions are significantly recognized by the majority in the role to create harmonious work relations. They use negotiation and engage in open discussions with the stakeholders.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings clearly showed that the trade unions in the study area effectively use labour relations as a conflict management tool and thus enhancing harmonious work environment. In addition, most of the trade unions drawn clear job specifications to their member to ensure efficient work performance and thus peaceful work relations.

The respondents additionally exhibited that the existence of harmonious work relations leads to high productivity in the workplace. Finally, the findings showed that unions encourage consultations among their members as a way of creating harmonious work relations.

Generally, it can be concluded that the trade unions in Moi University strive to enhance peaceful work relations for efficient conflict management. However, there are some few hitches especially in the communication of job specifications to the workers.

#### 5. Recommendation

- The study recommends that trade unions jointly with management should maintain continual negotiations with the employers to avoid employee-employer conflicts.

Collective bargaining should be promoted as a tool with which employers and employees are able to negotiate on matters affecting the work place.

- Trade Unions should also make recurrent communications to their members regarding the various aspects which may disrupt harmonious climate in the workplace in order to avoid conflicts. They should provide their members with education on the necessary conflict resolution skills to enhance capacity in handling work place issues.
- The management should promote democracy by allowing participation of workers in some of the decisions regarding work conditions because the workers may be better informed about the potential for productivity improvements within their departments than the managers.

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