CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL-LEARNING IN SMALL AND MEDIUM FIRMS IN KOGI STATE

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Abstract

This study focuses on constructive conflicts and organizational learning within SMEs in Kogi State. It examines the effects of trust and credibility, teamwork, performance improvement and common goals on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State; and ascertained the relationship between gender diversity and constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. The study uses a survey research approach and multi-stage sampling was adopted, the sample size of 367 was selected. Data were analyzed using both descriptive statistics, Stepwise Multiple Regression (SMR) and Pearson Correlation Matrix. Findings show that trust and credibility, teamwork, performance improvement and common goals have strong and significant effects on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Further, it shows that gender diversity has a significant relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. The study concluded that manageable amount of conflict is productive and recommended that SME owners and managers should be committed to long-term constructive conflict approaches, and should pay attention to gender diversity as a critical group contingency.

Keywords: Constructive Conflicts, Gender Diversity, Organizational Learning, Destructive Conflict, Organizational Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are often inevitable: the interaction network, the struggles for promotion, the display of intelligent quotient and so on. Richard and Russell (2014) expressed that there is richness and complexity in the relationships network, dreams and fears of the employees that make up the workplace. Conflict is a necessary and inevitable aspect of human existence since it is likely that there will be personal

preferences when there are human connection, dreams, and anxieties. Longe (2015) argued that it is by nature an ever present process and more likely to occur in hierarchical organizations where people with divergent view, opinion and background interact.

Conflict in work-relations is not often an aberration, since it creates or provides an opportunity for correction and reconciliation for the betterment of both the organization and the workers (Osad and Osas, 2013). It is important to know that constructive conflicts are pivots to instituting change that can benefit the SMEs in Kogi State. This is because constructive conflicts are a reflection of dispute over idea and perspectives. The good thing is that such conflict has the tendency of proving the viability and propensity of any considered idea and perspectives in the long-run. Three of the aforementioned conditions are considerable in this study about using constructive conflict to support organizational learning of SMEs in Kogi State.

Employees' diversity raises disagreement within the organization. The face-off between employees and employers has long been translated as destructive conflict. An effective conflict management is required to enhance constructive conflict. Managers must display confidence in their own abilities and aggressively embrace constructive conflict in order to motivate employees to take a stand. There is probability that SME owners in Kogi State see conflict as organizational learning point. Chibuokwu and Nwosu (2016) posited that conflict is inevitable; the ability to utilize it constructively for learning is very essential. Yıldız (2021) noted that properly managed conflict can help improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

Some of destructive conflicts are pointed out by Adeyemi, Ekundayo and Alonge (2010) as revolts, protests, unrests and violence as well as incessant closure of organizations. Rahim (2011) has proven that conflict does not have regular destructive tendency. Organizational learning relates with creativity and innovation that are crucial to the organizational culture of many SMEs. Some of the elements associated with the organizational culture are trust and credibility, teamwork, performance improvement and common goals. The organizational culture of some SMEs may not clearly recognize diversity at the workplace. Eneken, Anu, & Karin (2018) posited that the conflict culture viewpoint extends beyond the human level and provides additional insight into the dynamics of conflict management in the setting of an enterprise. Some factors determine the constructive nature of conflict. Lee, Choi, & Kim (2018) said that "gender diversity is a critical boundary condition for understanding why and when status conflict is likely to hinder team creativity". It is possible that the male gender has a different perspective about a certain idea and issue from their counterpart. Also the female gender may find it difficult to reconcile with popular perspective except being convinced to a great length. The possibility that constructive conflicts can influence organizational learning of SMEs in Kogi State needs to be investigated. Thus, the prime objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the effects of trust and credibility, teamwork, performance improvement and common goals on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

2. Ascertain the relationship between gender diversity and constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Two concepts underline the matter. These are constructive conflicts and organizational learning. Organizational-learning culture appears to be one of the key contextual components to enhance positive organizational outcomes (Baek-Kyoo and Ji Hyun, 2010). Meanwhile, constructive conflict can be used to stimulate organizational learning within SMEs in Kogi State.

Organizational learning may reflect learning within the organizational context. According to Saadat and Saadat (2016), the first to introduce the concept of organisational learning into the literature were Kurt and March. According to Scott (2011), learning in organizations is a multilevel process whereby members individually and collectively acquire knowledge by acting together and reflecting together. Knowledge is captured, spread and embedded in organizational features, such as strategies and protocols, it becomes part of an organizational context, or code that, in turn, influences what and how groups, communities, and individuals learn (Scott, 2011). Organizational learning is defined as a change in the organization's knowledge base that occurs due to past experience (Fiol & Lyles, 2015). Bratianu (2015) views organizational learning as a learning process through social interactions between the groups and organization levels. Organizational learning creates necessary conditions for the strategic renewal that balances continuity and change at the level of organization (Bratianu, 2015).

Constructive conflict implies meaningful and productive disputes. For there to be constructive conflict, there must be culture acceptance among employees, trust, and brainstorming sessions. There have been several attempts by scholars and authors to give holistic definitions of workplace conflict. But despite the divergent meanings, the term has acquired several common ideas underlined in most definitions. Conflict itself is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about. Conflict can be a positive force, and if handled constructively, can move a group forward (Thompson-Abell, 2017). Thus, constructive conflict reflects temporary disagreement over ideas and perspectives to certain issues.

Constructive conflicts depend upon the organizational culture of SMEs. Organizational culture does not only influence employee's performance, but also influence argument and conflict. For the purpose of this study, the dimensions of organizational culture (teamwork, trust and credibility, performance improvement and common goals, organizational functioning) identified by Ghosh & Srivastava (2014) are considered.

However, past studies had consensus on the link between organizational culture and employee conflict (Turban & Cheung, 2012; Cook et al., 2013). Constructive conflicts rely on teamwork, trust and credibility, performance improvement and common goals. Elgoibar, Euwema, & Munduate (2016) posited that trust is indispensable for constructive conflicts. Constructive conflicts have strong links with SMEs' organizational learning (see fig 1).
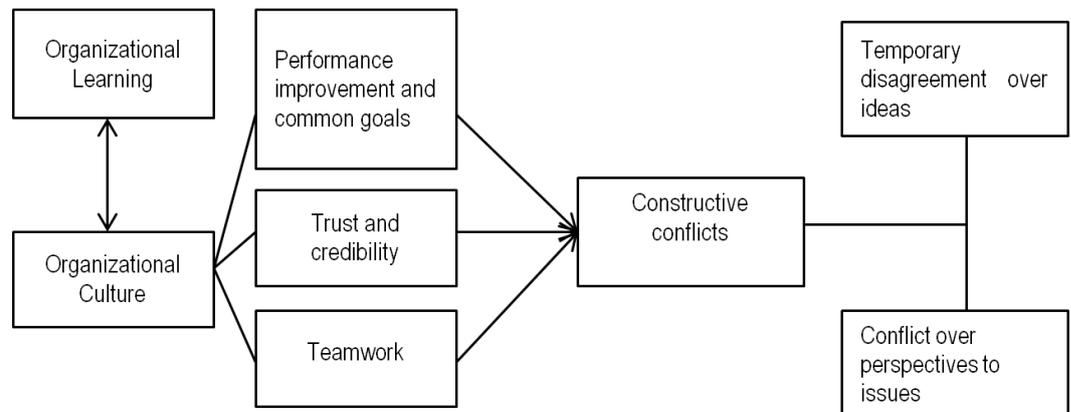

FIGURE 1.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS AND ORANIZATIONAL LEARNING
Source: Adopted from Jyothibabu, Farooq, & Bhusan Pradhan (2010), Turban & Cheung (2012), Cook et al. (2013), Elgoibar et al. (2016)

A popular consensus states that the measurement of organizational learning must be dependent on theoretical foundations. Yang et al. (2004) cited in Jyothibabu, Farooq, & Bhusan Pradhan (2010) measures organizational learning with "team learning" which is a reflection of synergy and pursuit of corporate goals in one spirit. Any team can be thought of as an open platform that converts numerous resource inputs into results.

Organizational Learning Theory (OLT) of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1978) is cardinal to this study. According to Gilaninia, Rankouh, & Gildeh (2013), the theory states that, in order to be competitive in a changing environment, organizations must change their goals and actions to reach those goals. The theory emphasize on actions towards goal. These cannot be achieved in a situation where conflict disrupts everything. Planned actions can be possible only under constructive conflict. It becomes highly imperative to consider making effective decision relating to proper and favorable action towards goals. The action is fundamental to the success of SMEs.

Importantly, organization learning is bound to happen when a conflict appears to have translated into constructive form. In a constructive conflict, every organization member comes to the same page; they agree and cooperate. Constructive conflict leaves managers with the best experience, and information therein stored. Argyris and Schon (1978) noted that it does not yet become organizational learning until

the information is shared, stored in organizational memory in such a way that it may be transmitted, accessed, and used for organizational goals. There are links between conflict and organizational learning. These links are continually updated overtime (Hahn, Doh, & Bunyaratavej, 2009). Organizations continually compare actual to expected results to update or add to their "memory".

3. METHODOLOGY

Predominately quantitative approach was used for this study. As a result, the study used a survey research approach. The purpose of the survey was to gather data about the issue (organizational learning and constructive conflict). The study considered 8,149 registered SMEs (SMEs-Finance, 2020) operating in Kogi State. Multi-stage sampling was adopted and the sample size for this investigation was calculated using Salant and Dillman's (1997) technique. The formula is the following:

$$N_s = \frac{N_p \, (p)(1 - p)}{(N_p - 1)\left(\frac{B}{C}\right)^2 + (p)(1 - p)}$$

Where:

N_s = completed sample size required

N_p = Sample-population

p = Proportion of expected response (50% or 0.5)

B = Acceptable sampling error (0.05 = +5%)

C = Confidence interval (1.960=95%)

$$\frac{8,149(0.5)(1 - 0.5)}{(8,149 - 1)(\frac{0.05}{1.960})^2 + (0.5)(1 - 0.5)} = \ 366.9082436334996 = 367 \ approx.$$

The sample size of the study is 367 at 99% confidence level. Out of the 367 copies of the administered questionnaires, 289 copies (78.75%) were returned; and 78 copies (21.25%) were not returned. Analysis was based on the returned questionnaires. To assess the instrument's reliability, the researchers administered copies of questionnaire to 50 participants, and used the Cronbach alpha method to measure the instrument's reliability. The results of the Cronbach's Alpha (α) are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1. RELIABILITY OF CONFLICT FACTORS

S/N	Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
1	Teamwork	.735	2
2	Trust and credibility	.820	2
3	Performance improvement and common goals	.890	2
4	Gender diversity	.750	2
5	Constructive conflict	.710	2

Source: Field Survey (2021)

The generated data for the study was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential analytical techniques. Stepwise Multiple Regression (SMR) and Pearson Correlation Matrix were applied. The models are specified below:

$$CoC = a + \beta_1 TCY + \beta_2 TMK + \beta_3 PIC + e \qquad (1)$$

Where:

CoC = Dependent Variable (Constructive Conflicts)

TCY = Trust and Credibility

TMK = Teamwork

PIC = Performance Improvement and Common Goals

a = Constant

β_1 = regression coefficient

e = residual or stochastic term

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section shows the data analysis according to the study's objectives.

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHY OF RESPONDENTS

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	123	42.6
Female	166	57.4
Total	289	100.0
Age		
< 20 Years	49	17.0
21-25 Years	98	33.9
26- 30 Years	77	26.6
31-35 Years	45	15.6
36- 40 Years	20	6.9
Total	289	100.0
Marital status		
Single	198	68.5
Married	39	13.5
Widow	29	10.0
Separated	17	5.9
Divorced	6	2.1
Total	289	100.0
Academic level		
Primary School Leaving Cert.	71	24.6
Secondary School Certificate	98	33.9
OND & Equivalence	49	17.0
B.Sc/HND & above	71	24.6
Total	289	100.0
Business experience		
Below 1 Year	168	58.1
1-2 Years	96	33.2
2-4 Years	14	4.8

4-6 Years	3	1.0
6-10 Years	3	1.0
10-15 Years	5	1.7
Total	289	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Table 2 shows that 123 respondents (42.6%) were male; and 166 respondents (57.4%) were female. The implication of this is that majority of SME owners in the study area are female.

Table 2 shows that 49 respondents (17.0%) are less than 20 years; 98 respondents (33.9%) are within the age range of 21 to 25 years; 77 respondents (26.6%) are within the age range of 26 to 30 years; 45 respondents (15.6%) are within the age range of 31 to 35 years; and 20 respondents (6.9%) are within the age range of 36 to 40 years.

Table 2 shows that 198 respondents (68.5%) were single; 39 respondents (13.5%) were married; 29 respondents (10.0%) were widow(er); 17 respondents (5.9%) were separated; and 6 respondents (2.1%) were divorced. The result indicates that the respondents who were single have better knowledge of the subject matter.

Table 2 shows that 71 respondents (24.6%) were holders of Primary School Leaving Certificate; 98 respondents (33.9%) were holders of Secondary School Certificate; 49 respondents (17.0%) were holders of OND & Equivalence; and 71 respondents (24.6%) were holders of Bachelor of Science/Higher National Diploma Certificate and above. Based on the result, it is observed that higher number of respondents have reasonable level of academic background that can be helpful for the understanding of the subject matter.

Table 2 shows that 168 respondents (58.1%) have less than one year business experience; 96 respondents (33.2%) have between 1 and 2 year business experience; 14 respondents (4.8%) have between 2 to 4 year business experience; 3 respondents (1.0%) have between 4 to 6 year business experience; 3 respondents (1.0%) have between 6 to 10 year business experience; and 5 respondents (1.7%) have between 10 to 15 year business experience. This result indicates that the respondents have lesser business experience.

TABLE 3. MULTIPLE REGRESSION ON EFFECTS OF TRUST AND CREDIBILITY, TEAMWORK, PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT AND COMMON GOALS ON CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.938[a]	.880	.879	.48736
2	.966[b]	.933	.933	.36333
3	.968[c]	.937	.936	.35389

Predictors: (Constant), Trust and credibility, Teamwork, Performance improvement and common goals

Source: Author

Table 3 shows that trust and credibility have effect on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (R^2= 0.880). This indicates that trust and credibility predict 88% of the variations in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Other factors may be attributed to the 12% unaccounted variations in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. The table also shows that teamwork has effect on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (R^2= 0.933). That is, 93.3% variations in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State are explained by teamwork. The remaining 6.7% un-estimated variations in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State may be attributed to other variables. The table reveals that performance improvement and common goals have effect on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (R^2= 0.937). This indicates that performance improvement and common goals explains 93.7% of the variations in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Other variables could account for the remaining 6.3% of un-estimated variances in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

**TABLE 4. ANOVA ON EFFECTS OF TRUST, AND CREDIBILITY, TEAMWORK, PERFORMANCE
IMPROVEMENT AND COMMON GOALS ON CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS**

	Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	497.958	1	497.958	2096.532	.000[b]
	Residual	68.167	287	.238		
	Total	566.125	288			
2	Regression	528.371	2	264.185	2001.315	.000[c]
	Residual	37.754	286	.132		
	Total	566.125	288			
3	Regression	530.431	3	176.810	1411.756	.000[d]
	Residual	35.694	285	.125		
	Total	566.125	288			

Dependent Variable: Constructive Conflict
Predictors: (Constant), Trust and credibility, Teamwork, Performance improvement and common goals
Source: Author

The proportions of variation in the regression models are depicted by Table 4, which provides the basis for significance testing. The table shows that using the model rather than guessing the mean is a better option. The mean square residual values (0.287 for trust and credibility, 0.132 for teamwork and 0.125 for performance improvement and common goals) are smaller than 1. These show that there are fewer deviations between the observed and fitted values. The P-value for the F-test statistics (2096.532 for trust and credibility, 2001.315 for teamwork and 1411.756 for performance improvement and common goals) are less than 0.001, providing strong evidence against the null hypotheses. The coefficient of determinations (in Table 3) for trust and credibility (R^2= 0.880), teamwork (R^2= 0.933) and performance

improvement and common goals (R2= 0.937) reveal strong and significant effects on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

TABLE 5. COEFFICIENTS ON EFFECTS OF TRUST AND CREDIBILITY, TEAMWORK, PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT AND COMMON GOALS ON CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.225	.080		-2.796	.006
	Trust and credibility	.984	.021	.938	45.788	.000
2	(Constant)	-.077	.061		-1.277	.203
	Trust and credibility	.530	.034	.505	15.620	.000
	Teamwork	.491	.032	.491	15.179	.000
3	(Constant)	-.035	.060		-.586	.559
	Trust and credibility	.451	.038	.430	11.746	.000
	Teamwork	.483	.032	.483	15.302	.000
	Performance improvement and common goals	.109	.027	.102	4.056	.000

Dependent Variable: Constructive Conflict

Source: Author

In Table 5, three variables were captured (trust and credibility, teamwork, performance improvement and common goals) in the model. The three variables entered the model with positive signs. Trust and credibility have linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (β= 0.451; sig <0.001). This means that 45.1% change in trust and credibility will lead to corresponding 45.1% change in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Teamwork has linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (β= 0.483; sig <0.001). This implies that 48.3% change in teamwork will lead to corresponding 48.3% change in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Performance improvement and common goals have linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (β= 0.109; sig <0.001). This implies that 10.9% change in performance improvement and common goals will lead to corresponding 10.9% change in constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

The weakest is the linear relationship between performance improvement and common goals and constructive conflicts within SMEs. Meanwhile the combination of the three variables in the model provides weak coefficients. On individual ground, trust and credibility reveals very strong linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (β= 0.984; sig <0.001).

Simultaneously, trust and credibility have strong contributions to the constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (given Standardized Coefficients β= 0.938; sig <0.001).

TABLE 6. CORRELATIONS ON GENDER DIVERSITY AND CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS

		Gender diversity	Constructive conflicts
Gender diversity	Pearson Correlation	1	.730**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	289	289
Constructive conflicts	Pearson Correlation	.730**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	289	289

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 shows the relationship between gender diversity and constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State (given that R= 0.730; Sig < 0.001). The 0.730 is the numerical description of how tightly around the imaginary line the points lay. Since the correlation is high, the point tends to be closer to the line. The variable (gender diversity or constructive conflicts) correlated with itself has a correlation of 1. The Sig value of less than 0.001 is the p-value associated with the correlation. It is however noticed that there is significant positive relationship between gender diversity and constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. This means that improvement in the management of gender diversity will simultaneously cause increased constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings show that trust and credibility have strong and significant effects on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. This affirms the claim of Elgoibar, Euwema, & Munduate (2016) that building a domain for trust helps in establishment of constructive conflicts. This advances the finding of Ndubisi (2011) that conflict handling styles are significantly associated with trust and commitment. Trust and credibility have positive linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Findings also reveal that teamwork has strong and significant effect on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. This indicates that conflict can have a positive impact on all teams if it is viewed as a potential change agent. When organizational members create a conflict and one or more other members respond constructively, individual differences and concerns can be acknowledged and moulded into common goals. Teamwork has positive linear relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. It was also found that performance improvement and common goals have strong and significant effects on constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Performance improvement and common goals have a

positive linear association with constructive conflicts. Changes in performance improvement and common goals would result in constructive conflicts.

Findings also show that gender diversity has significant relationship with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. This advances the finding of Bordean, Rácz, Ceptureanu, Ceptureanu & Pop (2020) that gender role is a predictor for the choice of conflict management styles as masculine individuals were highest on the dominating conflict style, whereas feminine individuals were highest on the avoiding style. In Kogi State, there appears to be a considerable beneficial association between gender diversity and constructive conflicts among SMEs. This suggests that better gender diversity management will result in more productive conflicts in SMEs at the same time.

6. CONCLUSION

The link between constructive conflict and SMEs' organizational learning in Kogi State has been empirically unveiled. Conflict was viewed from the constructive angle. In the organizational process, manageable amount of conflict is productive. Disagreement over ideas, methods, techniques or approach may lead to efficiency and favour the organizational process. Good amount of constructive conflict is instrumental to organizational learning. Constructive conflict can provide possible avenue for organizational learning by way of sharing knowledge and retaining it within the enterprise. Managers have significant role in knowledge generation through constructive conflict.

Constructively handled conflict can be a driver for organizational change. Evidence was also provided that trust and credibility, teamwork and performance improvement and common goals can drive constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State. Gender diversity is one paramount stimulator of constructive conflicts. It is established by this study that gender diversity has a substantial association with constructive conflicts within SMEs in Kogi State.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

1. SME owners and managers should be committed to long-term constructive conflict approaches such as establishing trust and increasing individual and organizational capacity as ways to boost credibility within the enterprise. To get the intended good outcomes through synergy in teamwork, SME owners and managers should adopt suitable conflict management styles. SME owners and managers should highlight common goals and shared commitment to performance improvement, which can help keep conflict in check and avoid it from detracting from the team's efforts.

2. SME owners and policy makers should pay attention to gender diversity as a critical group contingency. Gender diversity is a significant group contingency that can boost the positive effect of constructive conflict on team psychology and subsequent performance.

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