COPING STRATEGIES IN MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Abstract : Today's economic environment is characterized by multiple stakeholders from multiple cultural backgrounds, and often rapidly changing business situations creating a working environment which is high in complexity along with increased uncertainty. Organization's survival is dependent on the successful outcomes achieved by its members, i.e., it employees. In this competitive environment, employees need to successfully cope with the challenges that are thrown up, along with the ability to cope with certain unique aspects of a multi cultural environment. Such demands on the employees lead to adoption of different coping strategies by them. In this paper a conceptual model of employee coping strategies has been proposed. It is proposed that the model can be a useful tool for both researchers and practitioners working in the area of employee training and development.

Keywords: Multiple Stakeholders, Multiple Cultures, Coping Strategies,

1. Introduction :

Economic integration has been increasing at a rapid rate since dawn of the 21ˢᵗ century. The liberalization of Indian economy along with that of other countries like China, Vietnam, countries of eastern Africa has witnessed increased international business ventures. Expansion of Indian organizations into foreign ventures along with increased presence in different states of India has been furthered by rising middle-class incomes. Businesses like air travel, hospitality, fast moving consumer goods, leisure, multi-brand retail, multiple forms of service industry etc., have created new opportunities for organizations.

Inter-regional business opportunities have been accompanied by increasing exposure to a different and uncertain working environment for the employees. Such an environment, often, ends up significantly different from the one the employees were used to. An example of an Indian born and educated in a single state and remaining employed in the same state has been replaced by an employee who has to be willing to relocate to newer working environments as required by the organization.

Such shifts in working conditions and the differences in stakeholders create significant challenges for employees, which in turn create job-stress for employees concerned. This

paper focuses on employee job-stress and the coping strategies adopted.

Each context has its own unique types of stakeholders, apart from some common stakeholders. Even if the stakeholders are similar, their operating styles would be typically different from their counterparts in other states or countries. Examples of such a stakeholder are boy's clubs in West Bengal context. Each location has their own clubs or football-clubs, which are a significant stakeholders for business located therein. Such a stakeholder is not present in other states, especially in northern India and western India. Another example would be workers and their unions. An organization operating in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, taking examples for illustrative purposes only, would have to deal with different kinds of workers' unions and operating styles of the union-leaders. Similarly one can look at the employees within the organization, legal institutions, customers, political parties etc., as different stakeholders with whom the organization would have to interact to carry out business. In order to understand the stakeholders, certain concepts are defined as given in the following section.

Along with a complexity of dealing with stakeholders, an employee's task, especially those belonging to the managerial cadre, are no longer routine in nature. Tasks have increased in complexity and therefore to understand the different factors that add to employee stress, task related concepts which add to the challenge of managing in a complex business environment have been given in the following section.

2. The Concepts :

Job stress leads to different outcomes from the employees, which can range from positive outcomes of more diligence to negative outcomes like anxiety and paralysis in which the employees are incapable of taking decisions. The following section defines the concepts which leads to job-stress and looks at the different outcomes of the employees. The different outcomes are later linked to various types of coping strategies. In order to develop the conceptual framework, the concepts are described in the following sections.

2.1. Stakeholder Related Concepts :

Dealing with stakeholders requires one to understand different stakeholders. The following are the variables that are defined to understand different stakeholders.

2.1.1 Stakeholder's complexity: is defined as the structural and procedural complexity that is presented by a stakeholder. An example of such a structural complexity government departments can be amount of paper-work, different types of procedures and different sub-offices one has to deal with when setting up an industry. Unless one is familiar with the different processes and procedures, the complexity in dealing with the different requirements can be a challenging task.

2.1.2. Stakeholder Interfacing Challenges: defines that the challenge in dealing with the stakeholder.

Language – lack of familiarity with the language-in-use by stakeholders. This is evident in a multi-cultural context. An example would be the states where official work

compulsorily done in local language rather than national language or English.

Unstated/ informal expectations – different stakeholders might expect certain extra-benefits. For example gifts or bribes would be an informal expectation, which despite laws to the contrary, would be required to get the work done or the pending bill cleared.

2.1.3. Stakeholder's operating paradigm: the adherence to rules, the extent to which the stakeholders are conscious of time, the significance of economic responsibilities they carry out etc.. create different operating paradigms. This can be easily seen in operating processes of different organizations like private sector electricity companies versus government owner state electricity boards. The outcomes are manifested for customer – in terms of ease of interaction, transparency of rules, fixation of authority on individuals etc.. which makes it either stressful for outsides to interact or a pleasure is to interact.

2.2 Task Related Concepts :

2.2.1. Task complexity : A large number of researchers have attempted to conceptualise and define task and task characteristics. Researchers have classifies tasks according to task type and task properties. The task types include open, factual, navigational, decision-making etc. The properties include difficulty, urgency, structure and stage (Bryston & P. 2005). According to Li and Belkin's classification (Li & Belkin, 2008) of task involves two facets i.e. generic (includes source of task, time product, process and goal) and common (includes objective task complexity and interdependence). The task complexity basically describes the relationships between the task than national language or English.

dence). The task complexity basically describes the relationships between the task inputs. The task complexity basically can be approached from two dimensions, one being the managerial dimension and another being the technical dimension. Complexity can arise from both the dimensions.

Managerial complexity: The managerial complexity involves at the time of task creation itself. The task to be created should form a perfect collaboration of converting ideas in actions. It should be properly classifies as per budget, time and also stakeholders.

Technical complexity: The individual handling these tasks should be aware of all the technical aspects of the task. (Wood, 1986)The technical complexity of a task can better be explained by a game of chess. Where the player should have proper knowledge about how to move a particular type of piece (like a pawn or a knight) generalizes about all movements of pieces and therefore is fully redundant.

2.2.2. Task/ Process ambiguity : The task or process ambiguity is a problem of poor planning approaches to task and the process. If managers fail to accurately deliberate process roles and the tasks then certain task ambiguity can easily occur on the course of project performance. This will trigger confusion, wastage of time and other counterproductive problems.

2.2.3. Goal ambiguity : Researchers have found that Goal ambiguity hampers not only individual performance but also organisational performance. Hence to enhance performance, goal ambiguity has to be reduced. (Calciolari, Cantu, & Fattore,
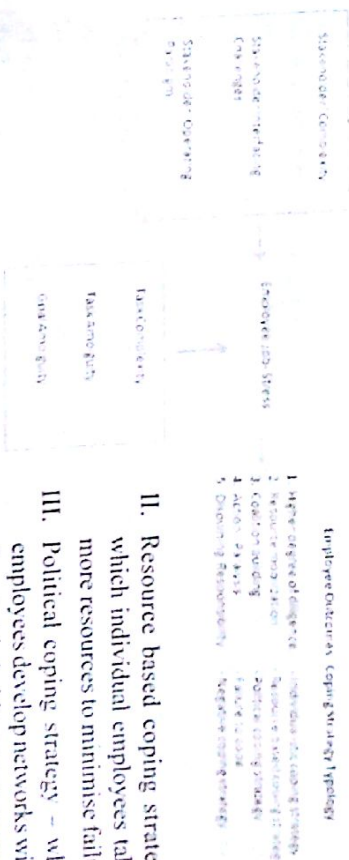
2011). Business today is becoming more complex. A good example to goal ambiguity can be quite visible in matrix organisations which often blur the lines of responsibility and leadership creating a huge amount of goal ambiguity. Whichever organisations deals with a growing number of multi-channels with customers with their own set of priorities and responsibilities are creators of goal ambiguity.

3. Conceptual Framework

Stress as a motivator acts due to creation of fear of failure. The fear may be amplified in case of possibility of a public failure. i.e. manifest to a larger body of stakeholders as compared to a limited number of stakeholders. This fear of failure or performance anxi-ety can also be identified to be a contributing factor for employees ensuring that they take steps to avoid failure. Different types of individual have different capabilities to cope with uncertainty and therefore the extent of efforts to minimise uncertainty can be looked as a way to develop an understanding of individual coping strategies.

Among the individual outcomes that can happen:

I. Higher degree of diligence
II. Resource mobilization
III. Coalition building
IV. Action Paralysis
V. De-attachment from Responsibility

II. Resource based coping strategy – which individual employees take on more resources to minimise failure.

III. Political coping strategy – wherein employees develop networks with different stakeholder or power centres in order to obtain more resources, or monopolise resources, or have more information access.

IV. Failure – in cases where individuals do not have the ability to engage in pro-active action and literally give up. As they perceive the work to be beyond their capability they are crushed by the weight of the work.

These can be linked to different types of coping strategies as given below. In most cases, employees to minimise their stress are likely to engage in multiple strategies (except for negative strategy) at the same time.

1. Individualistic coping strategies – where individuals, put simply, do more rigorous homework, in order to ensure success of their endeavours.

V. Negative coping strategy – wherein individuals distance themselves from the work/assignment and disown responsibility under various pretexts.

Different exposures to stresses, despite these strategies, are often accompanied by psychological, physiological and psychosomatic responses which add on to create health problems. Engagement or Disengagement strategies are adopted by the individuals as an outcome of the job stress. As it is quite evident today that for the success of the organisations their employees engagement and loyalty is quite vital. Hence it becomes quite important for the HR to move the employees from disengagement to engagement to enhance the competitive advantage of the organisation

4. Discussion

In the present article the impacts and the consequences of global expansion of organisations on its members have been studied. It has been discovered that the global expansion in multi-culture environment imbibes stress due to stakeholder related concepts and task related concepts. It is quite a established fact that any amount of job stress leads either positive outcomes to negative outcomes. Hence a person needs to build up the adequate coping strategies to be successful in their jobs. Before discussing the coping strategies it becomes very important to understand the concepts that lead employees to job stress. In this article two concepts that lead to job stress in a multi-cultural work environment has been proposed. One being the stakeholder related concept and the other being the task related concept. When discussing about the stakeholder related con-

cept three factors have been identified. They are stakeholder complexity, stakeholder interfacing challenges, and stakeholder's operating paradigm. Different countries governments have different rules and regulations leading to quite different procedural requirements in the forms of documentations. Unless one is familiar with the different processes and procedures, the complexity in dealing with the different requirements can be a challenging task and this leads to stakeholder complexity (Kimiagari, Keivanpour, Mohiuddin, & Van Horne, 2013). To achieve the effectiveness of stakeholder involvement appropriate dialogue and negotiations has to be done. In a multi cultural and multi political business environment these negotiations, dialogue and bargaining becomes very complex. The literature of challenges in multinational enterprises can be classified into categories including ethics, communication culture and human resources (Colakoglu, Tarique & Caligiuri, 2009; Sultana et al., 2013) when dealing with multiple stakeholders. The other concept that is discussed in the article is task related. In the multi cultural business environment simple tasks start becoming complex leading to stress on the task performers. The stressors in task related concepts are identified as task complexity, task ambiguity and goal ambiguity. Task complexity has been defined by various ways by the researchers. Wood (1986) classified task complexity into three type's component, coordination and dynamic complexity. Each element of task complexity consists of the amount and clarity of information which corresponds respectively to task difficulty and task structure. Thus task complexity can be viewed from both objective and subjective perspective (Liu & Li, 2011)

Once the drivers of job stress are identified then the possible outcomes of the job stress were discussed. The outcomes of the job stress were discussed. The outcomes range from positive to negative, based on the coping strategies adopted by the individuals. The coping strategies could give a macro impact based on the employees preferring to be engaged or disengaged. The typology of coping strategies that were discussed in the article based on the various literature surveys are individualistic coping strategies, resource based coping strategies, political coping strategy, failure and negative coping strategy. The efficiency of a coping strategy lies in its capacity to reduce immediate stress as well as to prevent its long term consequences, such as influence on both physical as well as mental well being. The effectiveness of a given coping strategy may appear different to the individual employing it than to those observing and evaluating it (Snyder, 1999). Traditionally coping strategies have been divided into dichotomous categories probably the most well-known coping models are the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the approach-avoidance model (Roth & Cohen, 1986). There could be possibly many coping strategies, but the efficiency of the strategies is yet to be established. We have limited our strategies only based on the positive to negative outcomes like higher degree of diligence, Resource mobilisation, coalition building, action paralysis and finally detachment from responsibility.

Based on these outcomes we have attempted a conceptual model for the coping strategies along with the job stressors. An extensive literature reviewed resulted in the

development of this conceptual model. The essential concepts of this model are divided into three categories. They are stakeholder related concept, Task related concept and employee outcomes based on the coping strategies adopted.

This model can be utilised by the HR practitioners and researchers in developing the appropriate training modules for the employees working in environments leading similar challenges of multi cultural context. The model can also be utilised for pre-employment selections. Tools to assess the adaptability skills, flexibility skills can also be utilised at the time of selection of a candidate for similar types of jobs. It is now for the researchers to find the effectiveness of this model that has been attempted in this article.

5. Contribution to Training and Development Literature

Human resource is a department which leads the development and upgrade of the corporate culture. The common corporate culture is crucial for the global organization. The organization cannot act the same way around the globe when the corporate culture is different. On the other hand, the development of the common corporate culture is difficult. This can only be achieved by the adequate training and development models. Since the nations are different. The HR role is to set up the international team, which develops the unified corporate culture and corporate values. The role of Human Resources is setting the essential training courses for managers. HR has to push managers to apply for the courses. They have to understand roots of the common corporate culture and

how they are expected to behave globally. The employees and managers have to communicate globally with colleagues around the Globe. The unified way of communication, the approach to problem solving and identifying the organization make global their perceptions of stressors and to improve their process of coping with the stressors at decisions easier (CIPD, 2006). The global-ization demands new skills and competen-cies. Managers have to think, globally, and they have to find advantages for the organi-zation on the global basis. They have to be able to negotiate with partners from differ-ent cultural background. The role of Human Resources is to help the organization to be-come the real global organization by impart-ing the right training to its members. (Kayode, 2012)

It is very important to understand the key causes and predictors of job stress before going for any training and development in-terventions by the researchers and practitio-ners. For this, a lot of international literature has been reviewed. The result do obtained are very consistent and reveal that high de-mands (workload), low support, low con-trol and emotional demand are the most im-portant factors associated with job stress. (Blewett, Shaw, LaMontagne, & Dollard, 2006). The reasons why such stressors have increased in the current era were suggested to be worldwide changes in the nature of the work. On conducting a review of literatures for the effective interventions in minimising the job stress it was found that the organisation level interventions in the train-ing and development function of the HR was very successful. These interventions like job redesigning / restructuring, communication, training and education programmes, partici-

pation and autonomy led to improve both the work environment and also stress related outcomes.

Training and education programmes could focus on altering the way the individu-als respond to stressors at work including their perceptions of stressors and to improve their process of coping with the stressors at work. These interventions should help and equip the employees with adequate knowl-edge, skill and resources to cope with stress-ful conditions at work. The training programmes can also target the employees experience negative responses so that the severity of the outcomes can be decreased. These training are mostly in the areas of health promotion or psychological skills such as coping strategies, exercises, relaxation and meditation.

The training programmes on coping skills will aim to help employees to manage stress. (Kim T, Patrick W, & David W). It is very evident that to successfully cope with the current job stress the following is important:

I. Being more knowledgeable about stress

II. Understand the process and affects of stress.

III. Identify the major stressors both the situation as well as the stakeholders

IV. Anticipate the coning of stress and plan accordingly

V. Develop successful stress manage-ment techniques.

Researchers and practitioners have come up with training modules which can move employees from disengagement to engage-ment. (Carnegie, 2012)

6. Conclusions

In this article we presented the two con-cepts i.e stakeholder related concept and task related concept leading to the job stress of the members of the organisation that have expanded globally. These concepts in the form of challenges are hindering the organisation's sustainable development in the volatile market. The concepts we have dis-cussed are purely that attribute of a multi cultural work environment. We have also identifies the outcomes both from positive to negative of the job stress on the employ-ees. The outcomes are based on the strate-gies adopted by the employees to combat the job stress. We tried to establish a con-ceptual model dealing with the concepts and coping strategies..

Dealing with different stakeholders and performing the tasks successfully in multi cultural business environment could be quite challenging. Understanding these challenges the researchers and practitioners of Human Resources can develope the adequate train-ing modules to train the employees to adapt the right coping strategies to overcome the challenges of this era of globalisation. Fu-ture research could include to empirically test this model and develope the framework of training modules to cope with the above said challenges. Further research could be initi-ated on the success and efficiency of differ-ent coping strategies, as there is generally not a lot known about the efficiency of dif-ferent strategies (Parris et al., 2011).

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