Construction Workers' Involvement in Management Decisions: A Bloemfontein Study

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Abstract:
Lack of employee involvement in management decision making process creates tensions between management and workers. This leads to accidents and work delay on construction sites with consequent decrease in project performance. This study explores the impact of employees' participation in management decision process so as to ascertain its applicability as a tool for improved motivation in South Africa. The study adopts a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews within construction firms in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The research shows that the involvement of employee in management decision processes contributes greatly to effective task implementation, creates positive working environment and reduces employee stress level on site. Furthermore, the employee participation in decision making could lead to reduction in workplace tensions. Involvement of employees in management decision gives employees the sense of self belonging that enable them to contribute their best to an organization.

Key word:
Construction, Decision making, Management, Worker, South Africa

1. Introduction

Employee motivation is a salient approach for improving the morale of the workforce in an enterprise. Health care, profit sharing, employee stock ownership plans, company cars, bursary, and various fiscal incentives have been in used to motivate workers (Kazaz *et al.,* 2008; Parkin *et al.,* 2009; Richardson IV, 2013). The incentives impact on the performance of employees (James *et al.,* 2006; Kreitner and Kinicki, 2007; Emmgholizadeh et al., 2009).

In addition, the involvement of employees in decision making motivates them to up their work performance (Greenfield, 2004; Wong, 2007 and Horsford, 2013). Adopting this strategy to motivate employees has less financial impact on organizations (Ramlall, 2004; Newstrom & Davis, 2004). Thus, it can be said that decision making contribute to the success of a firm (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2007). Workers participation in decision making helps management to effectively decide the courses of actions in enterprise. It also gives the employees an opportunity to express their viewpoints about an action. In other words, employee contribution to management decision has a positive effect on organization performance (Bashir, 2003; Newstrom and Davis, 2004).

The concept of employee participation in management decision has been a growing interest from human resource perspective in the last few years. Many enterprises face the challenges of empowering their employees through active participation in decision making. However, businesses today require creative employees who can take initiative, embrace change and

stimulate innovation (Ramlall, 2004; Gallie, 2013). Most of the new generation workforce wants to work for companies that can actively pay attention, embrace and accommodate their ideas and demands. Because of this, some businesses have changed their centralized control management with the hope of promoting flexibility as well as improving individual and organizational performance (Ramlall, 2004; James, *et al.,* 2006).

Employee participation has changed to take different forms of involvement. Employees can take part through participation in the work place (for instance, involvement in policy formulation in an enterprise) and become involved in decision making that leads to empowerment. Involvement of employees in decision making means that they have been empowered to make decisions that are work related. This new model of management has strongly disagreed with traditional management techniques that have emphasized control, hierarchy, and rigidity (Gallie, 2013). Involvement of employees in management decision tends to be associated with the concept of power; this implies that power is redistributed by those in senior position to those in more subordinate position (employees) (Knudsen, 2011).

Despite the literature on the importance of this phenomenon on many organizations, the adoption is still to be extensive documented in the construction management literature. This study was therefore conducted to bridge the gap. More so, anecdotal evidences from a preliminary investigation show that this strategy for motivation has not been adequately practiced in South Africa construction. This research investigated the impact of workers participation in management decision in contracting firms in Bloemfontein, South Africa with a view to ascertain if it can be a tactic to reduce the tensions between management and workers in South Africa construction.

2. Research Methodology

A phenomenological study was conducted among construction actors in contracting firms in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 2014. Data were collected through in depth face-to-face interviews. The purposive method was used in the selection of firms that participated in the study. Specifically, invitations were sent to the heads of fifteen registered construction firms out of which eleven eventually participated in the study. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Three weeks to the commencement of the interviews, pilot study was carried out. This was done to make the actual interview exercise consistent. The outcome of the pilot study was used to compile the actual interview guide. The interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks generally between 20 to 30 minutes in duration in the office of each interviewee.

After transcription, the resulting data from the interviews were analysed thematically. The educational levels of the participants ranged from a senior certificate to a post-graduate diploma, while construction industry experience ranged from 20 to 33 years (Table 1). The management levels of interviewees varied from junior management to senior management, with job titles ranging from owners manager to managing director (Table 2). All the eleven (11) interviewees responded to the questions posed to them in the face-to-face interviews.

Table1: The demographic information of the interviewees

Level of Education	Years in Construction Industry
Bachelor's Degree	30

Matric	25
National Diploma	20
Matric	20
Bachelor of Technology	33
National Diploma	28
National Diploma	28
Bachelor of Technology	33
Bachelor's Degree	25
National Diploma	28
National Diploma	27

Table 2: The level of management and job title of interviewees

Level of Management	Job Title
Board and Senior Top Management	Owner and Director
Board and Senior Top Management	Owner
Board and Senior Top Management	Quantity Surveyor
Senior Top Management	Director
Senior Top Management	Director
Operational Management	Consultant
Operational Management	Health & Safety Specialist
Operational Management	Quantity Surveyor
Middle Management	Site Agent
Middle Management	Quantity Surveyor
Middle Management	Quantity Surveyor

3. Findings of the Interviews

3.1 Extent of workers participation in Management decision

From the interviews conducted, all the interviewees assert that there is limitation to workers participation in management decisions in most of the contracting firms in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The reason behind this according to the interviewees is that most employers are sceptical and scared of losing the control over their businesses. Four of the interviewees opine that employees' participation in management decision in most contracting firms in Bloemfontein South Africa is at a minor level. This means that the involvement may not have much impact on managements' final decisions as key issues take are decided by management / employers. All the interviewees emphasized that the current practice is the use of employees' representative, which may be the foreman. According to the interviewees, it is the responsibility of the representative to pass across any important issue between the management and the workers. This means that workers meet on site with their representative who passes across vital information from the management before the commencement of work. The workers also meet at the end of the day's activities to discuss their problems with their representative who also passes the information across to the management. All the interviewees opine that employees are not proficient enough to be involved in management decisions. Therefore, they affirm that employees are only expected to submit suggestions on matters that have direct impact on their working conditions to their representative and are not in position to take actions / decisions that pertain to the matters neither are they in position to evaluate the impact of the decisions on the overall performance of the organization.

3.2 Benefits of Workers Participation in Management Decisions

Eight of the interviewees emphasize that employee's involvement in management decision brings about positive changes in an organization and that the changes ensue as soon as employees realise that they are part of the organization. The first positive change according to the interviewees is reduction in work absenteeism and employees' turnover. The interviewees assert that the reduction occurs as a result of the fact that employees have the impression that they have a better place to work (job security) and are being more successful in their jobs. The second positive change according to six of the interviewees is improvement in workers motivation. Such circumstance improves their self-esteem, job satisfaction and cooperation with consequent reduction in tensions between management and workforce. The interviewees also opine that reduction in tension between management and workforce further leads to reduction in stress, conflict and accidents as well as work delay on construction sites. Similarly, six of the interviewees mention morale as a positive change agent. Morale according to one of the interviewees can be defined as the capacity of a group or individual to maintain belief in an institution or a goal, particularly in the face of opposition or hardship.

Another interviewee further opines that morale depends on the attitude of the management toward the employees; how management reacts towards employees when completing tasks. If the reaction is positive, it could enhance employee self-esteem. Two of the interviewees also responded that the sense of self-belonging by employees' in an organization can also increase morale. The two interviewees further assert that involvement of employees in management decision reduces the rate and cost of site supervisions as employees are also part of the organization management; knows what to precisely do right from the inception of work, and can make suggestion on some of the likely problem that may ensue on site as well as the possible solutions to those problems. In brief, all the interviewees agreed that employee involvement in management decision contributes positively to management decisions and creates an atmosphere of self-belonging as well as ownership in an organization. The interviewees contend that employee involvement could be management tool to promote workers efficiency within an organization, with the notion that every worker is a stakeholder and has to ensure that organizational goals are achieved for the benefit of all. Table 3 summarizes the opinions of the interviewees on some of the benefits of employees' participation in management decision process as well as the responsible factors.

Table 3: Benefits of Employees Participation in Management Decision

Benefits	Contributing factors
Reduction in work absenteeism and employee turnover	Better working condition (job security)
Improvement in workers motivation	Job satisfaction and management cooperation Reduction in tensions between management and workers Employees stress reduction on site
Improvement in workers morale	Good working relationships Employees sense of self belonging
Effective organization decision process	Employees sense of self belonging and ownership of an organization
Reduces the rate and cost of work supervisions on site	Employees know what to do at the right time, and Employees are also part of the organization management
Promotes workers' efficiency within an organization	Everyone is a stakeholder and has to ensure that organizational goals are achieved for the benefit of all

3.3 Problems of Workers Participation in Management Decision Process

Eight of the interviewees opine that the major problem of workers participation in management decision in some of the contracting firms in Bloemfontein is opposition. Opposition occurs when one employee is to head others rather than working together as a team. The interviewees comment that opposition among employees creates unhappy work force that can lead to accident on site. It is therefore, essential for an organization to know that while involving employees in management decision, they are expected to function and work together as a team for desirable results to be achieved. If such opposition is allowed to thrive in the workplace, the aim of workers' involvement will be completely jeopardized.

Another problem of employees participating in management decision process according to three of the interviewees is that employee's missions and visions may occasionally be different from that of the organization. This can lead to employees' work decline with consequent decline in the performance of the organization. Seven of the interviewees point out the problem of employees' contentment. The interviewees advocate that once workers knew about the income, expenditures and profit margin of the organization, they become difficult to gratify in terms of salary and remunerations; they become self-centred and agitate for more pay increases, almost every time. The interviewees advised that it is better and safer for an organization to concentrate more on how employees can be trained for better performance than to involve them in management decision that can later be a source of problem for the firm. Table 5 gives the summary of the problems of workers participation in management decision and some of the responsible factors as opined by the interviewees.

Table 5: Problems of Workers Participation in Management Decision

Problems	Contributing factors
The fear of losing control over a business	Inadequate knowledge of the benefits of worker involvement in management decisions by most employers
Workers' opposition	Lack of unity among the workforce on site
Work retrogression	Difference between the goals and visions of an employee and an employer
Lack of contentment among the employees	Employees self-centred

4. Discussion

All the interviewees reveal that lack of involvement of employees in management decision in an organization can make managers to make rules that may have serious negative effect on the employees. This can lead to high rate of employee turnover, unhappiness and job dissatisfaction. According to nine of the interviewees, if the aforementioned situations persist over a long time, it can affect the performance of the employees. Consequently, the young and well-endowed employee of the organization may decide to seek for appointment elsewhere where their services will be fully and better consulted. This means that the former organization will be left with no option than to recruit and train new employees which has serious cost implication on the organization especially if the processes persist over a period of time.

This study suggests that employees' participation in management decisions among the interviewed contractors in Bloemfontein South Africa is limited. This means that employees may not be making major impact on management decisions in this context. This is at variance to the finding of Bhuiyan (2010) on employee participation in decision making process in RMG sector of Bangladesh where employees make major impact on management decisions. Further, involvement of employees in management decision allows organizations to have a better understanding of the mind set of their employees. This enables such organization to address

the concerns of every worker. The aforementioned positive changes in an organization concur with the findings of Bashir (2003), James et al. (2006), Kposowa (2005), Bhuiyan (2010), and Richardson IV (2013).

The interviewees in this Bloemfontein study however suggest that some of the ways in which managers can involve employees in management decision. Suggested ways include the introduction of employee committees, employee union as well as employees work forum that will enable employees to meet regularly to discuss organization issues. The interviewees opine that it is in such gathering that employees can share their opinions on some of the problems that concern them and the organization, as well as the possible solutions to the problems. Other methods of involving employees in organization management decision according to some of the interviewees include:
- Employees can identify problems, while the management suggests and recommends for solutions;
- Management can outline the organization's problems and constraints and hand it over to the employees to solve;
- Management and employees can come together to make decision on possible solutions to organizational problems;
- Management can seek employee opinions and then, makes the decision, and
- Management can make use of suggestion box to obtain information from the employees on matters that have direct impact on their working conditions.

In addition, seven of the interviewees opine that two important strategies that can be used to propagate the need to involve employees in management decision in South Africa. These strategies entail the use of work shop trainings for most organization owners, and also the use of annual conference and seminar on the subject matter. The interviewees were of the opinion that it is in such meetings or gatherings that the needs to adapt the system by every business owner as well as the danger of not adapting it can be fully discussed and understood.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This exploratory study has shown that workers' participation in decision making among contractors in Bloemfontein can be deemed to be limited. The reason behind this is that most organisation owners are sceptical about losing control over business decisions. It can also be established from the study that active involvement of employees in decision making process in an organization brings about positive and negative changes.

However, positive changes appear to outweigh the negative changes. Positive changes highlight the reduction in absenteeism and employees' turnover, improvement in workers motivation, job satisfaction, reduction in tensions between management and workers, reduction in stress; conflict and accidents at work, reduction in work delay on construction sites, improvement in workers morale, reduction in the rate of site supervision, and creation of employee sense of self-belonging as well as ownership of an organization.

In contrast, negative changes that should be avoided are the lack of contentment among the employees and the perceived loss of control by employers. Ways in which managers can involve employees in management decision include the introduction of employee committees, staff union as well as employees' suggestion forum. Given the limitations of exploratory

studies, there is a need to conduct an extensive study that would confirm the perceptions uncovered in this study. Such study could examine the interplay between the positive and negative changes of employee involvement in management decision making processes in South Africa.

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