Full Length Research Paper

The relationship between leadership and employee morale in higher education

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The University of South Africa (UNISA), like many other institutions of higher education, is facing new challenges, including budget cuts, a new funding formula, changes in technology, mergers, new leadership, and a call for increased research productivity and graduation rate. All these challenges have contributed to dampened staff morale and have led to some resistance and apprehension. The aim of the study reported in this article was to explore the morale, commitment, satisfaction and perceptions of staff of UNISA's College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) and to explore the relationship between leadership and morale. A self-administered web-based survey approach was used in a census to collect information among all 604 CEMS staff members. A 42.1% response rate was obtained. The results revealed an overall satisfaction index of 62 and that of CEMS leadership of 61. The study revealed that there is a relationship between leadership and morale, and those leadership competencies such as communication, fostering trust and team building set a clear direction for the college impact on morale. It is recommended that morale surveys should be conducted to obtain the requisite information before developing strategies that relate to employee morale, retention and performance.

Key words: Leadership, morale, retention, performance, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Today's global environment in general and the higher education (HE) sector in particular face growing pressures that will further strain their capabilities and inhibit their ability to meet growing stakeholder demands. The sometimes turbulent HE environment is characterised by changes such as mergers, downsizing and changes in the funding formula, budget cuts, increasing competition, staffing shortages (Kovner and Neuhauser, 2004) and a significant decrease in staff morale. These challenges have an adverse impact on the confidence and performance of employees (Robbins, 2003). Employees' trust in the institutional leaders has become a critical issue. Prior research on leadership has shown that how a leader acts and communicates with followers during very challenging periods can create the foundation for future trust in the leader (Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy, 2001) and impact on morale. Specifically, the approach taken by leaders in handling negative events such as layoffs or budget cuts may directly affect followers' subsequent trust in their leaders (Korsgaard et al., 2002;

Tourish et al., 2004). Having trust in one's leader or direct supervisor has been linked to desirable performance outcomes such as satisfaction, retention, commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour (Connell et al., 2003; Corbitt and Martz, 2003; Costa, 2003; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002).

According to Schuler (2004), most people who experience low morale in the work environment blame management or their immediate supervisor for their leadership-related competencies such as communicating vision, energising staff, demonstrating trust and loyalty, and developing teams.

According to Johnsrud (1996), academics stay where morale is high, where they feel mentored (Plata, 1966); where they experience a sense of community (Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002), autonomy (Tack and Patitu, 1992) and intellectual challenge (Magner, 1999); where institutional support is clear and pervasive (Mellow et al., 2003); where they make a decent living (Kerlin and Dunlap, 1993); where the definition of scholarship is sufficiently

broad to encompass their teaching and scholarship (Antonio, 2002); and where they feel their voices are heard, their contribution is sought and valued, and they are given a chance to participate in leadership and decisions that affect them (Turner and Myers, 2000).

Naris and Ukpere (2010) suggest that attracting and retaining skilled, knowledgeable and competent employees in tertiary educational institutions is important for effective delivery of services in the changing environment. This has been a challenge in most higher education institutions that have experienced problems of low morale, skills shortage, stifled academic freedom, low salaries, high academic-student ratio, higher workload, and exclusion from decision-making processes. If these problems are not addressed in higher education institutions, they will have a ripple effect on the functioning and delivery of the higher education services, which in turn could have a negative impact on economic development. The higher education qualifications framework in South Africa has changed the academic landscape for many institutions. Universities such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) have subsequently experienced many challenges, such as changes in the funding formula with emphasis on research output and throughput; the need to utilise technology although the majority of students do not have access to advanced technology; the focus on Africanisation, which requires a different emphasis in terms of the relevance of study materials and language; global imperatives; the comprehensive nature of the merged institution; and changes in the leadership of the university. It is acknowledged that these extensive and varied changes that took place in the universities before, during and after the merger have brought about some resistance and apprehension. The major signs of this resistance and apprehension at UNISA include resignations, early retirements, low levels of commitment, a lack of trust in management, poor customer service, decreasing productivity, and low levels of staff satisfaction. These aspects have translated to low levels of morale, motivation and initiative. This information was based on the results of the formal and informal staff satisfaction survey conducted by the College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) through dialogue meetings and management workshops (Tustin and Goetz, 2010). The results of an institution-wide UNISA staff satisfaction survey undertaken in 2007 indicated that the employees' perception of management was very poor and the staff morale and job enthusiasm were very low (Tustin and Goetz, 2010). It subsequently became important to undertake a college-specific survey that would lead to the development of CEMS-specific strategies to address the low morale and improve retention. Furthermore, since leadership is important in any organisation, and over 65% of the current leadership in UNISA's CEMS (including the executive dean and both deputy executive deans, one director of school and chairs of departments) is new (appointed in the past 12 months),

months), the need to address the low morale has become urgent. This could best be done by first conducting an employee morale survey which is said to provide more reliable and in-depth analysis of information for decision making (Bowles and Cooper, 2009).

Other studies (Millett, 2010; Neely, 1999) have revealed that low morale can gradually destroy employees' commitment, adversely affect the product or service they offer, and alienate the clients and customers they serve. Low morale could have many sources besides the factors referred to above, such as poor economic conditions, a clash of cultures following a merger or acquisition, and poor management. Poor morale tends to be contagious. Once poor morale has set in, it could be difficult to identify its sources. According to Bowles and Cooper (2009) that is why conducting a morale survey is an appropriate approach to dealing with the cause rather than the symptoms of the challenges. To overcome these challenges leaders of institutions of higher education need to seek creative strategies to improve and maintain the performance and high morale of employees. Is has become apparent that improving and maintaining high employee morale is a key factor in the pursuit of institutional success. CEMS, as the largest college on the African continent, with a student population of more than 200 000 from all over the world, urgently needs to address these challenges of low morale and retention which, if not addressed, could have widespread negative consequences for the country specifically and the continent in general.

The college then undertook a staff morale survey which was the first of its kind in the College of Economic and Management Sciences. This study took place in the context of a number of university challenges, including budget cuts, new leadership, and a call for increased research productivity (which some academics perceived as being at the expense of teaching). The aim of the study was to explore staff commitment, satisfaction and perceptions of CEMS and its leadership so that appropriate strategies and initiatives to address morale and retention challenges can be developed and implemented based on reliable information. This study was commissioned by the executive dean of CEMS and conducted by the Bureau of Market Research (BMR), a department within CEMS. A census was conducted among all CEMS staff to measure staff morale in the college. A self-administered Web-based survey approach was utilised to collect information from all 604 staff members. A 42.1% response rate was obtained. The results revealed that the new leadership had brought about new and acceptable changes that had improved morale and reduced intentions of resignation. These results confirm what the literature says on the importance of leadership on employee morale and retention. The relevant literature presented below is followed by a description of the methodology, the presentation and analysis of data, and a discussion of the results. The article ends with the conclusions and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on employee morale by first defining the term. This is followed with a presentation on the importance of morale in organisations, the causes of low morale and how to deal with low morale. The last section concludes with the gap to be addressed through this study.

Definition of morale

Morale may be defined as an intangible concept that refers to how positive and supportive a group feels toward the organisation to which it belongs (Haddock, 2010) and the special feelings members of the group share with others, such as trust, self-worth, purpose, pride in one's achievement, and faith in the leadership and organisational success. Seroka (2009) defines employee morale as the general level of confidence or optimism experienced by a person or a group of people, especially if it affects discipline and willingness. According to Finger (2005), morale is more influenced from the top down (that is by leadership) than from the bottom up. High or low morale is not just made up of a single factor; it is a combination of related factors. These factors include changes in the internal and external environment as well as the leadership approach taken in responding to those changes. In addition, morale may be thought of not only as a group phenomenon but also an individual matter. Group morale depends on the morale of each individual in a group. These definitions reveal the importance of morale in organisations and its relevance to the organisational environment and leadership.

Importance of morale in organisations

Neely's (1999) research explored the relationship between employee morale and productivity, as well as possible measures that a supervisor can take to improve employee morale. His results revealed a pattern that links the productivity of employees with their level of morale. Ewton (2007) emphasises the fact that employee morale is associated with absenteeism, which has been reported to cost large businesses in the United States $760 000 per year in direct payroll costs, and even more when lower productivity, lost revenue, and other effects of low morale are considered. Low morale can be costly to an institution. Morale is also regarded to be the fuel that drives an organisation forward or the fuel that feeds the fires of employee discontent and poor performance (Ewton, 2007). Low morale carries a high cost: the Gallup Organisation (2008) estimates that there are 22 million actively disengaged American employees, with a price tag to the economy at the tune of $350 billion per year in lost productivity.

Millett (2010) gives six reasons why staff morale is important: improved productivity; improved performance and creativity; reduced number of leave days; higher attention to detail; a safer workplace; and increased quality of work. Mazin (2010), adds that high employee morale leads to people coming to work on time, improved communication, less time wasted on gossip, improved recruitment and retention, and more creativity. It is evident from the literature that employee morale is very important in organisations and if not effectively managed it can have adverse effects on the overall productivity and performance of the organisation. In addition, morale can energise and improve productivity from employees, and at the same time it creates a positive working environment. Furthermore, employee unhappiness related to aspects of the work environment (such as morale, little motivation and lack of communication) are some of the reasons cited for employees leaving the organisation in South Africa (The DPSA, 2006). It is vital to determine the causes of low morale so that it can be effectively managed. The causes of low morale are discussed in the next section.

Causes of low morale

Among the reasons given for low morale are poor leadership qualities of the immediate supervisor (Schuler, 2004). A study of leadership in the Canadian workplace reported by Psychometrics Canada (2010) revealed that poor leadership has negative effects on employee morale. Some of the leadership skills that are critical in enhancing morale are good communication, and the ability to deal with change, manage people, set goals and solve problems (Psychometrics Canada, 2010). Other writers like Robbins (2003), whose studies focused on higher education, also emphasise that change and poor leadership are primary causes of low employee morale. Furthermore, Robbins (2003) and Herzberg (2003) advocate removing demotivators and creating new motivating strategies to address low morale. Stevens (2009) indicated that organisational culture affects employee morale and productivity and that there are factors that lower employee morale. These negative factors, according to Stevens (2009), include the following: leadership not serving as exemplars, little or no accountability, a lack of career and succession planning, too many silos, and departmental infighting. White and White (2009) agree with these findings and further indicate that the leadership culture of command and control weighs heavily against employee morale. Studies by Senge (1990) and Lezzotte (2006) agree with these findings. Dye and Garman (2006), posit that distrust of management, poor interpersonal relations, and inflexible working conditions could also contribute to low employee morale. It is also noteworthy that low morale could also be caused by departmental layoffs or closures, labour

negotiations and contract disputes, high employee turnover rates, changes in leadership, and unclear expectations and corporate direction (Workforce Performance Solutions, 2006). Ways of dealing with low morale are discussed below.

How to deal with low morale

According to Senge (1990) and Greenleaf (1996), leadership-related competencies can be addressed through servant leadership. Greenleaf (1996) proposes that a great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. In addition, he emphasises that leaders who practise servant leadership are more likely to be trusted. In order to improve morale in the work environment leaders need to create a culture of trust in an organisation. According to Schein (1992), leaders have the ability to shape and influence the organisational culture through role modelling, the way they allocate resources, how they reward employees, and by the criteria they use for recruitment, promotions, and terminations. Levin (1999) contends that a climate of trust exists in organisations when managers do what they say they are going to do and are consistent in their actions. According to Dye and Garman (2006), managers can earn trust and improve employee morale by being accessible and authentic, fostering openness, and through role modelling. These authors believe that developing effective communication, building cohesiveness in teams and having the ability to energise staff are indispensable leadership competencies.

The study by Psychometrics Canada (2010) on employee morale recommends that leaders should be more effective in addressing issues of morale, should talk less and listen more, provide clear expectations, have more informal interaction with staff, clearly communicate how the organisation plans to manage change, assign tasks to staff based on skills rather than office politics, hold people accountable, give employees more responsibility, overcome resistance to change, and defer to people with greater expertise. In his study on ideas for invigorating morale in higher education (Robbins, 2003) proposes job enrichment and enhancement, learning new knowledge, and ensuring that reports prepared for management are also sent to staff. Stevens (2009) provides five management solutions for dealing with low employee morale. He suggests that managers should begin by attracting the right talent, and hiring for skill and behaviour, looking at best practice from the best, hiring for passion and focusing on the customer.

According to Finger (2005), in order to improve the esprit de corps of a group, the morale of each individual in the group must be improved. This is best achieved through the personal missionary work of the manager. Greenleaf's (1996) teachings indicate that the servant leader is servant first, after which a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The servant leader ensures that other people's highest priority needs are being served. Employee morale can also be a psychological disposition that is subject to environment, work, economic factors and corporate culture. The first step in the process for improving employee morale is to do a client survey/opinion survey. Later one can follow up with the results of the survey, implement an action plan, carry through with the plan, ensure that top management continue building trust within the institution, and finally ensure that ongoing departmental and company-wide meetings are held (Seroka, 2009). Employee attitude surveys are a valuable tool for any organisation. As seen from the literature review, these employee surveys provide information that may be used to improve productivity and commitment and employee morale. By identifying the root causes of attitude in the workplace, the organisation can take direct action to increase overall job satisfaction. Leaders of higher education institutions (HEIs) spend their time, resources, and energy in seeking out the best and the brightest academics the job market has to offer. However, once these individuals are hired, management does not always know how to bring out the best in them. Instead, these individuals often remain at that level when in reality their potential is far beyond that level. It is interesting that most universities even offer academic staff - especially equity candidates - extra remuneration to attract them, but not much is done to retain them. Unchallenging environments with little or no opportunities for professional growth and advancement often also lead to low employee morale (Workforce Performance Solutions, 2006).

In view of the challenges and consequences of low morale stated above, this article provides a source of information for the college, the university and higher education institutions in general. This information can be applied in addressing the low morale issues and other performance-related issues that have resulted from changes and poor leadership. The purpose of the survey was to obtain reliable information from the employees in order to develop appropriate strategies for showing care and concern for the well-being of all staff and for creating a positive, supportive, secure, stimulating and productive workplace environment.

This study also identified key areas of concern regarding staff perceptions and experience so that interventions could be rapidly designed to enhance job satisfaction, reward and enthusiasm. In turn, staff performance, buy-in and support of college and institutional plans and objectives, as well as service delivery and efficiency in specific operational areas could be improved. Other aspects on which to focus would be to identify training and development needs, foster communication, and establish whether the initiatives employed by the new college leadership have had any positive impact on morale. The new college leadership also introduced a series of initiatives and would like to assess their

effectiveness with regard to employee morale. These new initiatives introduced in CEMS in 2009/2010 include mentorship programmes, team- building activities for the whole college, the executive dean's sharing of the vision and plan at the beginning of the year, visiting each one of the 17 departments in CEMS, participating in national events such as celebrating the FIFA 100 days to kick-off, soliciting input for strategic planning purposes from all members of the college and communicating management decisions to the college, hosting a breakfasts and work-shops for women in women's month in August, breakfast seminars to welcome new employees, and providing writing for publication training opportunities to academics. The following sections, which present the methodology of the study, are followed by the results.

METHODOLOGY

A census was conducted among all CEMS staff in April/May 2010 to measure staff morale in the college. A self-administered Web-based survey approach was used to collect information among all staff members. The research questionnaire for the study was designed by the BMR with inputs from the CEMS executive dean. The questionnaire was uploaded on the Lime Survey Software Programme and pilot tested prior to being implemented. A list containing the e-mail addresses of all CEMS staff members was provided by the Office of the executive dean and the UNISA human resources department. These lists were merged and used to invite all CEMS staff to complete and return the staff morale questionnaire within one week of receiving the e-mail invitation to participate. The e-mail invitation was accompanied by a letter of motivation from the executive dean to support and participate in the survey. The initial invitation to participate was supplemented by two solicitations to encourage late respondents or non-respondents to participate.

Research focus

The questions in the CEMS staff morale questionnaire largely used a 5-point closed-ended rating approach to capture staff's satisfaction and confidence levels regarding the staff morale aspects highlighted above. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended response option to allow staff to comment finally on aspects most or least liked about CEMS and to identify future challenges to be addressed by CEMS.

Research instrument design

The questionnaire designed for the staff morale survey included job and leadership satisfaction ratings and job and college performance ratings. More specifically, the Likert scale measurement method was used to measure satisfaction and performance and used the following scale anchors:

Satisfaction ratings

Very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied and extremely satisfied.

Performance ratings

Very poor, poor, average, good and excellent: The Likert format

lends itself to a basic method of index construction. Since identical response categories were used for several items measuring satisfaction and performance, each item was scored in a uniform manner. To illustrate the way in which the index method was used to construct index scores for each relevant research variable, it should be noted, for example, that all 'very dissatisfied' ratings were allotted a weight of 0, while dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied and extremely satisfied ratings were weighted by 25, 50, 75 and 100. The end result returned an average index score for each variable where scores closer to 100 indicated higher staff morale while scores closer to zero indicated lower staff morale. This explanation also reflects the value of the index method when making relative comparisons between a set of selected variables. Regardless of whether all research variables return low or high staff moral index scores, some variables will always reflect relatively higher or lower staff morale when compared collectively. This methodology also supports a business approach towards identifying relatively lower staff morale index variables and to focus on these variables in support of corrective actions and higher staff productivity. Consequently, improved staff morale strategies will primarily focus on those variables that adversely affect staff morale.

Finally, the index method also supports longitudinal analysis. Therefore changes in staff morale could be monitored over time. Such an approach is also ideal to measure the effect of corrective actions following from previous measurement periods. With no repetitive studies conducted to date, the baseline findings of this study will largely serve as a benchmark for future studies.

Pilot study and ethical clearance

A total of 15 staff members were used to pilot test the research instrument and methodology used. The pre-test showed positive findings in terms of the research approach and participation of res-pondents, and featured very promising prospects in terms of study focus, relevance and accuracy. As the study involved engagement with humans, the research project was also ethically cleared by the CEMS Ethics Committee.

Data editing, capturing and storing

The Web-based survey approach permitted the electronic capturing of data on submission of the survey. Senior BMR staff edited, verified and cleaned the captured data prior to storing and analysis. The analysis is presented in detail in the next section, which also elaborates in more detail on the participation rate of CEMS staff. The participation rate indirectly reflects on the morale of people currently employed at CEMS.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the outcome of the CEMS staff morale survey reflecting on the commitment, satisfaction, expectations and service evaluation of 254 staff members regarding 75 service performance areas of CEMS. More specifically, the section focuses on the following research focus areas:

1. Job satisfaction of staff within CEMS
2. Job ratings of staff within CEMS
3. Staff ratings of CEMS as a place to work
4. CEMS leadership ratings

Each of the afore-mentioned aspects is discussed in

Table 1. Job commitment by business unit (highest and lowest index scores).

Research focus area	Business unit				
	Centres and institutions	School of accounting sciences	School of economic sciences	School of management sciences	Total
Job commitment	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**
How committed are you to your long-term career at CEMS?	83.65	83.89	66.46	77.96	78.80
How long do you plan to continue your career at CEMS?	90.79	94.93	77.78	88.78	89.77

detail in separate sections below. The discussions are presented according to selected research constructs including business unit, tenure, gender, designation and age. Prior to these detailed discussions, an overview is given of the profiles of staff who participated in the study in order to better contextualise the outcome of the study.

Sample

As mentioned earlier, a total of 254 staff members out of the total number of 604 participated in the CEMS staff morale survey. Staff members from all the three schools and centres and bureaus were involved. The response rate was 42.1%, which is regarded as exceptional for a Web-based survey, as this type of survey usually results in a response rate of below 20%. Of the total number of CEMS staff participants who indicated their gender, 42.1% were male and 57.9% were female. Of those staff members who indicated their population group, 63.8% fell into the non-designated (white) group. A third (35.1%) of participants fell into the age group 21 to 34 years, while approximately a quarter were in the 35-44 (26.8%) group and a further quarter in the 45-54 (26.0%) age group.

SURVEY ANALYSIS BY SELECTED RESEARCH CONSTRUCT

Due to varying response rates, it was decided that the most value could be gained from reporting the survey findings according to the following constructs: the Business Unit (Centres and Bureaus, School of Accounting Science, School of Economic Sciences and School of Management Sciences); tenure (years employed at UNISA by selected category); gender; population designation classified as non-designated (White employees) and designated (African, Asian and Coloured employees); and age (years by selected age category). Findings according to each of these constructs will be discussed in sections below.

Survey analysis by business unit and research focus area

Tables 1 to 5 show the outcomes of the survey findings

by business unit and according to the 75 research variables investigated in the study. However, only the high and low indexes are presented due to the volume of the data. Appendix 1 gives the details of the 75 research variables. Table 1 reflects clear job commitment of CEMS staff in planning to continue a career at CEMS. In relative terms, staff at the School of Economic Sciences seemed least committed to a long-term career at CEMS. The results in Table 2 indicate that the highest satisfaction levels (top five service items) were recorded for the following variables (in order of priority): direct supervisors; research-related training opportunities being offered; CEMS as a place to work; overall job; and work giving staff a sense of personal accomplishment. On the other hand, the following variables recorded relatively poor job satisfaction index scores (in order of priority) across most business units: the morale of people with whom CEMS staff work; market-related salaries; fair allocation of workload among employees; compensation matching responsibilities; and professionalism of the people with whom CEMS staff work. Opportunities for personal development recorded the highest job rating and opportunities for advancement recorded the lowest job rating Table 3.

In Table 4, high CEMS ratings were recorded for the following variables (in order of priority): pride in working for CEMS; optimism about the future of CEMS; and likelihood of referring a friend to CEMS as a place to work. The following items recorded the lowest CEMS ratings: teamwork across departments; retaining high-quality employees; and employee turnover. Table 5 reveals that the following variables recorded the highest ratings (top three service items) for CEMS leadership (in order of priority): setting direction and goals; setting a clear vision for the future; and the ability to make changes that positively impact on CEMS. The lowest ratings for CEMS leadership were recorded for the following variables: addressing external issues facing CEMS; addressing internal issues facing CEMS; and the ability to make changes that positively impact on CEMS staff.

Survey analysis by tenure

The results revealed that staff members who indicated

Table 2. Job satisfaction by business unit (highest and lowest index scores).

Research focus area	Business unit				
	Centres and institutions	School of accounting sciences	School of economic sciences	School of management sciences	Total
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
CEMS as a place to work	81.73	76.94	65.85	68.01	72.30
That career-related training opportunities are offered	57.69	75.56	64.63	69.62	69.70
CEMS leaders in your work environment are positive role models	68.27	68.33	59.76	63.98	65.30
That research-related training opportunities are offered	62.50	77.22	63.41	77.42	73.50
That the expectations of your job are clear	75.96	70.00	64.02	67.74	68.80
That the workload is fairly allocated among employees	66.35	50.00	47.56	42.20	48.40
That you are provided with a safe working environment	80.77	71.39	68.29	63.71	69.00
That your compensation matches your responsibilities	57.69	56.39	37.20	43.82	48.70
That your duties are clearly defined	76.92	66.67	63.41	61.29	65.20
That your manager/supervisor ensures that you are recognised and appreciated for your efforts	68.27	66.94	63.41	63.17	65.10
That your manager/supervisor supports you in your professional development	71.15	69.72	70.12	69.89	70.00
That your salary is market related	53.85	50.83	39.02	41.13	45.60
That your supervisor cares and responds to issues that are most important to you	67.31	66.39	70.12	62.90	65.80
That your work gives you a sense of personal accomplishment	75.96	69.17	64.02	72.31	70.20
The morale of people with whom you work	53.85	39.17	40.24	47.31	43.90
The professionalism of the people with whom you work	60.58	56.39	46.34	51.34	53.30
Your ability to maintain a reasonable balance between family and work life	74.04	69.72	60.98	60.22	65.20
Your direct supervisor	71.15	73.89	73.17	74.46	73.70
Your job overall	79.81	73.89	63.41	69.89	71.30

Table 3. Job ratings by business unit (highest and lowest index scores).

Research focus area	Business unit				
	Centres and institutions	School of accounting sciences	School of economic sciences	School of management sciences	Total
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Having what you need to do your job	80.77	68.61	60.98	59.41	65.20
Opportunities for advancement	48.08	56.11	50.61	59.68	55.70
Opportunities for personal development	70.19	66.11	64.02	71.51	68.20

Table 4. CEMS ratings by business unit (highest and lowest index scores).

Research focus area	Business unit				Total
	Centres and institutions	School of accounting sciences	School of economic sciences	School of management sciences	
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Likelihood of referring a friend to CEMS as a place to work	73.08	70.56	57.32	62.63	65.70
Employee turnover	61.54	56.67	45.12	48.39	**52.20**
Retaining high-quality employees	62.50	56.11	40.85	45.97	**50.50**
Teamwork across departments	55.77	54.72	39.02	46.51	**49.20**
I am optimistic about the future of CEMS	72.12	68.89	60.98	64.52	66.30
I am proud to work for CEMS	81.73	73.06	61.59	70.70	71.20

Table 5. CEMS leadership ratings by business unit (highest and lowest index scores).

Research Focus Area	Business Unit				Total
	Centres and institutions	School of accounting sciences	School of economic sciences	School of management sciences	
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Ability to make changes that positively impact on CEMS	72.12	65.28	55.49	62.90	63.50
Ability to make changes that positively impact on you	66.35	60.28	48.78	56.99	57.80
Addressing external issues facing CEMS	64.42	60.00	49.39	55.38	57.00
Addressing internal issues facing CEMS	62.50	60.28	48.78	57.80	57.70
Setting a clear vision for the future	71.15	66.94	58.54	68.82	66.70
Setting direction and goals	75.96	66.39	57.93	69.09	67.00
Trustworthiness	71.15	64.17	55.49	62.37	62.80

their term of employment allocated low rating scores to three specific focus areas: market-related salaries (45.09), the morale of staff with whom they work (43.96), and teamwork across departments (48.49). It is also evident that staff members who had been working at CEMS for two years or less seemed more motivated and satisfied than those who had been working at CEMS for longer periods (65.68). Notwithstanding the above, the results show that, across tenure categories, staff members were committed to a long-term career at CEMS (89.88).

Survey analysis by gender

Overall, the gender analysis showed no significant differences between males and females. Satisfaction was relatively low among both females and males for fair allocation of workload (48.97), compensation matching responsibilities (48.77), market-related salaries (46.19) and morale of colleagues (45.06). Employee turnover (51.85), retaining high-quality employees (50.10) and teamwork across departments (49.79) also received low ratings by both males and females.

Survey analysis by designation

The results revealed that both designated and non-designated staff members allocated low scores for seven research focus areas. These are: fair allocation of workload among employees (50.11); matching of compensation with responsibilities (48.57); market-related salaries (46.49); morale of colleagues (45.39); employee turnover (52.85); retaining high-quality employees (51.10); and teamwork across departments (50.33). It is evident from the results that staff members from the designated group felt that employees were not treated with respect (51.74) and that equal opportunities were not available to air grievances (53.78). They also

felt that they were not involved in decision making affecting their position or work (53.49) and did not receive appropriate recognition of their contributions (54.36). The satisfaction scores of the designated group for these items were significantly lower than those of the non-designated group. On the other hand, staff members in the non-designated group indicated that there were few opportunities for advancement (54.40) and that they were unhappy with the professionalism of the people with whom they worked (54.05). Despite these previously mentioned low ratings, staff members from both the designated and non-designated groups planned to continue their careers at CEMS (90.08).

Survey analysis by age

The results also revealed that satisfaction ratings were significantly lower among older staff members who were 45 and older (57.98). This would seem to corroborate the low ratings among staff working at CEMS for longer periods, as stated above. The results also revealed a definite recurring trend with low scores for the following across all age groups: fair allocation of workload among employees (48.44); matching of compensation with responsibilities (48.34); market-related salaries (45.85); staff morale of colleagues (44.40); and teamwork across departments (49.38).

This section analysed the survey results of the staff morale survey, which are summarised below.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

This section summarises the quantitative research results of the CEMS morale study conducted among 254 CEMS staff members. The discussion also elaborates on the likes and dislikes of CEMS participants and the anticipated future challenges that CEMS is likely to face as perceived by staff and provided in response to open-ended questions.

Staff commitment, satisfaction and perceptions of CEMS

Overall, CEMS staff seemed to be committed to a long-term career at CEMS. They indicated that they planned to continue their employment at CEMS. Overall, satisfaction among CEMS staff was lowest with regard to the following aspects:

1. The morale of people with whom they work
2. Market-related salaries
3. Fair allocation of workload among employees
4. Compensation matching responsibilities
5. Professionalism of the people with whom they work

The designated group (Africans, coloureds and Indians) indicated relatively lower satisfaction with regard to:

1. Employees not being treated with respect
2. Equal employment opportunity to air their grievances not being available
3. Felt they were not involved in decisions that affect them
4. Did not receive appropriate recognition for their contribution

The non-designated group (whites) indicated relatively lower satisfaction with:

1. Professionalism of the people with whom they work
2. Opportunities for advancement

However, CEMS staff in all categories reported in this study showed high job commitment, appreciated assistance and support received from direct supervisors, experienced a sense of personal accomplishment from their work and valued research-related training opportunities available in CEMS. Results revealed that satisfaction was relatively higher among staff in the School of Accounting Sciences and relatively lower among staff in the School of Economic Sciences. This trend was also noticeable in the job satisfaction levels and job ratings discussed above. Overall, whereas staff were generally proud to work for CEMS and were optimistic about CEMS's future, they regarded teamwork across departments and retention of high-quality employees less favourably. Results relating to the perception of leadership are presented below.

CEMS leadership

Figure 1 reflects the summarised staff ratings of CEMS leadership by business unit. The results revealed that staff in the centres and bureaus, School of Accounting Sciences, and the School of Management Sciences showed relatively higher satisfaction with CEMS leadership than staff members in the School of Economic Sciences. Overall, staff members were not confident about CEMS's ability to address internal and external issues facing the college and about its ability to make positive changes that impact on staff. On the other hand, staff members were satisfied with the vision, mission and goals set by CEMS. The staff morale index that was finally compiled is presented in the next section.

Staff morale index

Figure 2 reflects the overall summarised staff morale by business unit. All staff ratings on 75 morale statements were combined into a single index score. The rationale for compiling a single index score was to allow for
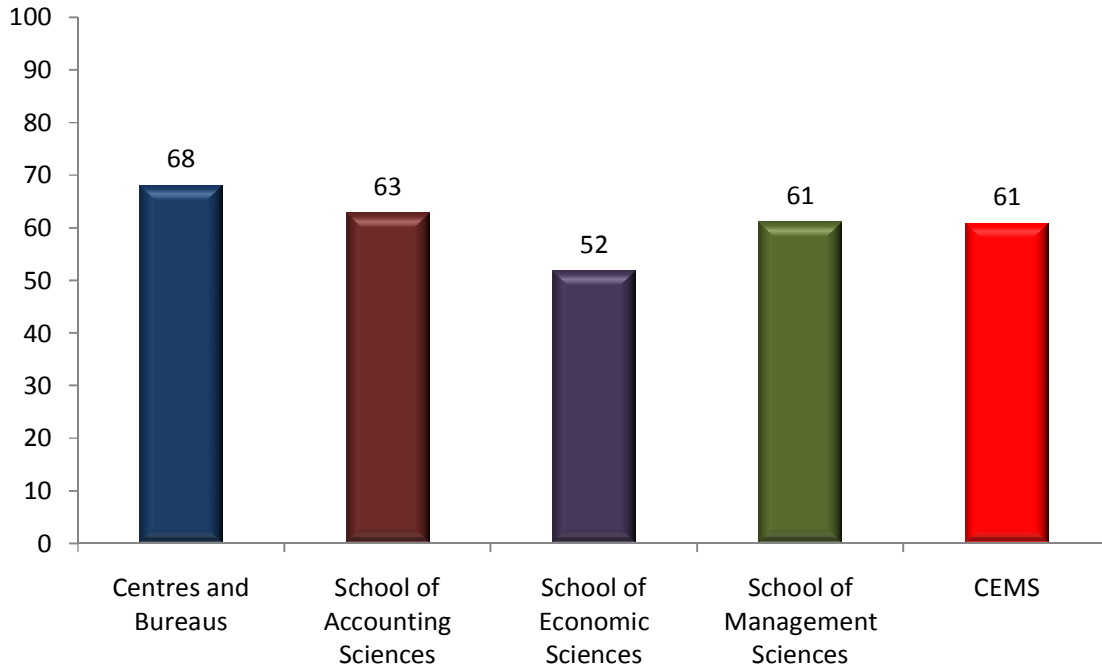
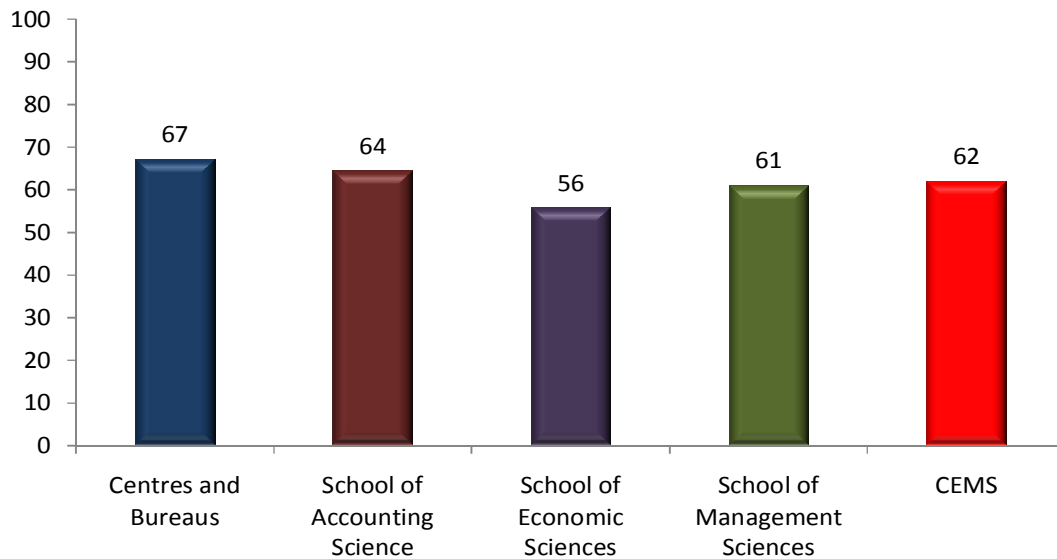**Figure 1.** CEMS Leadership ratings by business unit (Average index).

Figure 2. Staff morale index (Average Index).

broader comparison and for future longitudinal analysis to measure changes in staff morale over time. It is clear from the figure that staff morale in all schools was higher, except for the School of Economic Sciences, which recorded the lowest morale. The overall staff morale for CEMS was slightly above average and could still improve somewhat. In the conclusion and recommendations some direction is provided regarding aspects that CEMS should improve on in future, which could assist in developing strategies to improve staff morale. The next section reflects on those aspects that CEMS staff members are most appreciative of and which may not be included in the 75 morale statements but were obtained through open-ended questions.

MOST-LIKED ASPECTS ABOUT CEMS

This section highlights what the staff values about CEMS.

The research findings are based on the outcome of the open-ended response format used to record staff likes about CEMS. The findings are summarised to allow for specific analysis and interpretation:

1. Being part of a successful, leading and excellent college with a good reputation
2. There are opportunities for growth/development Communication and openness
3. Contributing to the development of skills in South Africa
4. Inspiring leadership, motivation, support and interaction from the deanery
5. Line managers value opinions, are supportive of and caring towards staff members
6. Deanery support for team building, balancing fun, family feeling and high performance
7. Improved caring and professional working environment
8. Diversity of people together with a spirit of togetherness and openness

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Besides citing the aspects liked most about CEMS, college staff were also encouraged to list future challenges for CEMS during the next 12 months. Some of these challenges are listed as follows:

1. Improving service delivery to students
2. More attention to mentoring and succession planning
3. Fair remuneration
4. Equal and fair workload
5. Reduce administrative burden on academics
6. Address the office space challenge
7. Better parking space
8. Efficient call centre
9. Improve leadership training for CODs
10. Recognition for administrative work

OTHER COMMENTS

Finally, the survey allowed CEMS staff to provide any additional comments related to staff morale at CEMS. Some of the common additional comments are listed thus:

1. Filter down the positive environment advocated by the deanery to departmental level
2. Improve communication between academics and administrative staff
3. Trained staff assistance to assist with CEMS registration
4. Commend CEMS leadership for efforts to make the college an excellent workplace
5. Negotiate with HR for higher salary percentile or notch
6. Dean's personal touch of is inspirational

7. Upgrading of the building to make it acceptable.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The aim of the study was to explore staff commitment, satisfaction and perceptions of CEMS so that appropriate strategies and initiatives to address morale, retention and performance challenges could be developed and implemented. Furthermore, the study sought to assess the effectiveness of the initiatives introduced by the new college leadership. To do this, a staff satisfaction survey was conducted to determine the employee morale and uncover issues that would provide input into strategies for improving morale and performance in UNISA's College of Economic and Management Sciences. The results do reveal the importance of leadership behaviours and direct supervision to employee morale as presented above. The outcome of the study reflects high levels of appreciation and respect for the leadership, inspiration, and trustworthiness of the CEMS executive dean. Based on the comments given in the open-ended questions above, family values of caring and work enjoyment advocated by the CEMS executive dean seem to have improved staff confidence and morale. This indicated that the approach leadership takes in responding to changes in an institution can have an impact on staff morale (Dye and Garman, 2006). It would seem that special attention is required to address equity matters in the college. The designated group showed relatively lower satisfaction levels than the non-designated group. This is common in the higher education institutions where attracting and retaining equity academics is a challenge (Aguirre, 2000; Antonio, 1998).

Furthermore, the results revealed that the aspects which might have an impact on the morale of the staff may be external to the department and college and hence may limit the college leadership's ability to influence them. Poor indexes include the market-related salaries, compensation matching responsibilities, ability to address external issues facing the college (which could be due to changes in higher education), address the office space challenge (due to inadequate space brought about by mergers), better parking space, and upgrading of the building to make it acceptable. These aspects are external factors that need the attention of the top leadership in the universities or even the ministry of education. This implies that the changes in the external environment, especially in higher education, may call for the attention and effective leadership of the institutions of higher learning if morale and retention issues of academics and administrative staff are to be addressed in totality. This is confirmed by (Seroka, 2009) who indicates that in the midst of internal and external changes top management should continue to build trust within the institution. This indicates that the changes characterising higher education, such as mergers, downsizing,

re-configured funding formula, budget cuts, increasing competition, and staffing shortages (Kovner and Neuhauser, 2004) could adversely impact on the confidence and performance of employees (Robbins, 2003) and need the attention of institutional leadership.

The results further revealed that employees' trust in the institutional leaders is a critical issue. Staff indicated that they had confidence in their executive dean and direct supervisors; this raised their morale. Prior leadership research has shown that how a leader acts and communicates with followers during very challenging periods can create the foundation for future trust in the leader (Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy, 2001) and influence morale. Having trust in one's leader or direct supervisor has been linked to desirable performance outcomes such as satisfaction, retention, commitment to CEMS, organisational citizenship behaviour, and performance, as confirmed by studies such as those by Connell, Ferres and Travaglione (2003), Corbitt and Martz (2003), Costa (2003) and Dirks and Ferrin (2002).

The results further revealed that the school with the lowest scores in all research areas also scored the lowest on leadership rating, suggesting that there is a need for leadership training in the school and its departments. Studies by Hare and Hare (2002), Gmelch (2004b) and Raines and Alberg (2003) confirm that most of institutions of higher learning do not provide training for the expert academics whom they promote into management or head of department positions. A study by Schuler (2004) also confirmed that people who experience low morale in the work environment blame the leadership or their immediate supervisor. Based on these results, it seemed as if leadership-related competencies such as communicating vision, energising staff, demonstrating trust and loyalty, and developing teams had a positive effect on morale in CEMS. The comments from staff indicated that they were satisfied with the initiatives introduced by the new college management.

The results also revealed that academics prefer to stay longer where morale is high. This is shown by their commitment to a long-term career at CEMS. The results identify mentoring, succession planning, 'sense of community', and clear and pervasive institutional support as determinants of commitment to a long-term career in the workplace. Studies by Johnsrud (1996), Plata (1966), Johnsrud and Rosser (2002) and Mellow et al. (2003) confirm these results. The results also revealed that staff commits to a long-term career where they feel their voices are heard, their contribution is sought and valued, and they are given a chance to participate in leadership and decisions that affect them. This is further confirmed by Turner and Myers (2000). The results also signal some differences in morale for tenure, in that those that had been in the college for two years or less were more satisfied than those that had been there for longer periods. This would call special attention to this category and change management strategies. Of interest in the results are the challenges which the employees would

like to have addressed in the next twelve months. This included improving services to students, a concern that implies caring for clients' needs. Furthermore, the two schools that showed higher morale have a higher participation rate on third stream income generating short learning programmes. This could signal the positive impact these programmes have on morale, especially where there is direct remuneration provided for such initiatives as was the case in CEMS.

These results have provided the information required for decision making in developing strategies that would improve the morale and performance of CEMS. Furthermore, as the first of its kind in the university college it can be replicated in other colleges, universities and institutions of higher learning to address the challenges of morale, poor leadership and performance. Due to the size of the college which is larger than three residential universities put together, and the largest of its kind on the African continent, the results can be generalised to other institutions of higher education — not just in South Africa, but in the whole of Africa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS, VALUE AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusion

Employee morale is an important aspect for any organisation in that it can affect performance and productivity. In this article the literature and the results have presented of an employee morale survey using the case of the largest College of Economic and Management Sciences in South Africa and Africa. The results showed that both internal and external factors affect employee morale and that there is a relationship between leadership and employee morale. CEMS leadership ratings in terms of setting direction and goals, keeping staff informed, external/internal issues facing CEMS, caring about employees, serving as ethical role models, setting a clear vision for the future, openness and honesty, communication and trust in leadership had an overall satisfaction index score of 61. This indicates that leadership approaches can influence staff morale. Furthermore, the results revealed that the initiatives introduced by the new leadership have had a positive impact on morale and have significantly reduced the intentions of employees to leave the college (with a satisfaction index score of 89.77 and relatively high job commitment: index score= 78.80). These findings, supported by literature (Schuler, 2004; Stevens, 2009; White and White, 2009; Lezzotte, 2006; Robbins, 2003) reveal the importance of leadership behaviours on employee morale. Aspects that influence employee morale alluded to include communication, building trust, developping teams and promoting team-related activities, dealing with internal and external change, succession planning and direct supervision. The outcome of the study reflects

high levels of appreciation and respect for the leadership, inspiration and trustworthiness of the college leadership. Family values and work enjoyment advocated by the CEMS executive dean seem to have improved staff confidence and morale. This suggests that the approach leadership takes in responding to changes in an institution can have an impact on staff morale. This is supported by other studies presented in the literature (Connell et al., 2003; Corbitt and Martz, 2003; Costa, 2003; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Schuler, 2004; Johnsrud, 1996; Plata, 1966; Turner and Myers, 2000; Dye and Garman, 2006; Kerlin and Dunlap, 1993).

The results of this study have revealed that there is a need to pay attention to differences in age, tenure and race in developing strategies to address issues of morale. A "one size fits all" strategy might not be effective. Allowing employees to participate in short learning pro-grammes which provide for third income stream and offer extra compensation for staff could positively contribute to morale building. This study has provided the requisite information for developing strategies to create a work environment that is conducive to high morale and produc-tivity. Literature (Bowlers and Cooper, 2009; Dye and Garman, 2006) supports the importance of first conduc-ting employee surveys before developing strategies that affect them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be proactive in addressing issues of morale by first conducting a survey of staff morale to determine the issues that affect morale and productivity before developing retention- and performance-related strategies. Furthermore, it is recommended that higher education institutions pay attention to the leadership skills and competencies when appointing managers who in most cases would have been academic experts but lack managerial experience. This implies that appropriate training and development should be offered to managers in higher education institutions to equip them with the requisite leadership skills. HEIs should be alert to external factors that might affect employee morale. They could also provide a platform to allow staff an opportunity to voice their concerns and provide inputs for management such as having a portal where they can anonymously give their input. Creative ways of recognising and compensating 'good' work and staff carrying extra workload, as well as paying market-related salaries should be explored.

HEIs should be alert to differences in age, tenure and race when developing morale- and performance-related strategies, which may require different approaches.

LIMITATIONS AND VALUE

Since this was a baseline study using a unique research

design based on an index methodology, implemented in the higher education environment in a South African college of economic and management sciences for the first time, it largely disallows any comparisons. Despite this shortcoming, the research model presented a constructive design to identify constructs affecting staff morale relatively more or less than others. Internally the model also suited comparative analysis of staff morale across different sub-units within and across colleges. This approach allowed for a more confined approach to identifying both sub-units and constructs affecting staff morale within the economic and management sciences field in higher education in South Africa. Furthermore, the study provides information that can be utilised for decision making and strategy formulation at other universities.

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Appendix 1: Focus areas for the staff morale survey instrument

A. General staff information (that is staff position, department, tenure, age and gender)

B. Job commitment and satisfaction featuring staff commitment to a long-term career at CEMS and satisfaction with:

1. Job overall
2. Direct supervisor
3. Leaders as positive role models
4. Supervisor's ability to keep staff informed on what is going on in CEMS and UNISA
5. Staff views and participation are valued
6. Supervisor cares and responds to important issues
7. Amount and frequency of informal praise from and appreciation expressed by supervisor
8. Professionalism of colleagues in department
9. Management/supervisor support in staff professional development
10. Manager recognition and appreciation of efforts
11. Fair workload allocation
12. Team spirit in direct work environment
13. Morale of people in direct work environment
14. Own morale
15. Employee review process
16. Work gives feeling of personal accomplishment
17. Opportunities for advancement
18. Receive appropriate recognition for own contributions
19. Work gives sense of personal accomplishment
20. Reasonableness of work responsibilities
21. Ability to maintain reasonable balance between family life and work life

22. Compensation matching responsibilities
23. Overall job security
24. CEMS as place to work
25. Longitudinal comparisons
26. Job ratings
27. Ratings of CEMS regarding future optimism, pride, equal career opportunities, teamwork, diversity and quality of products and services

CEMS leadership ratings in terms of setting direction and goals, keeping staff informed, external/internal issues facing CEMS, caring about employees, serving as ethical role models, setting a clear vision for the future, openness and honesty, communication and trust in leadership.