

An Investigation of the Factors Influencing Levels of Staff Engagement in a Provincial, Referral Hospital: The Case of Bindura Provincial Hospital

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ABSTRACT

The research sought to investigate the factors associated with the levels of staff engagement at Bindura provincial hospital, a referral hospital in Mashonaland Province of Zimbabwe. A case study research design was used in this study. Questionnaires and interviews were used as methods for data collection at Bindura Hospital. A sample size of 59 nursing staff out of 119 nursing staff was used. In addition, the researcher used stratified random sampling technique to draw information from respondents. Both primary and secondary methods of data collection were used. Data collected was analysed and presented in the form of graphs and pie charts. The major findings from the research were that the levels of employee engagement at Bindura Provincial Hospital are at low ebb due to factors such as the general working conditions, living conditions and remuneration. While Government had secured the assistance of the Global Fund, an arm of the United Nations, in terms of supplementing nurses' salaries, the overall salaries of nurses in the public sector still lagged far behind those of their counterparts in the private sector. The arrangement by the Global Fund, to assist the Government stem out the high attrition rate of nursing staff will be undertaken for specific periods of time, hence the uncertainty regarding the situation beyond the stipulated period of time, will also likely influence nurses' desire to leave. The researcher recommended that effective instruments for measuring employee engagement should be put in place in the health sector in general since the nursing staff falls under the Public Service Commission. The Government should also endeavour to improve the conditions of service of nursing staff.

Keywords: *Employee Engagement, Organizational Commitment, Job Satisfaction, Motivation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bindura Provincial Hospital is a provincial referral hospital which is situated in Bindura, the provincial capital of Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. Established over fifty years ago, during the pre-independence era, the hospital has developed into a modern hospital that caters for an ever growing provincial population which now stands at close two million people, according to the last census results. The town is now host to two universities, two mines, as well as an ever increasing number of both small scale and commercial farms. The hospital has got various departments which include the out-patients, female ward, male ward, children's ward, maternity ward, x-ray department, eye unit, dental, human resources, accounts, administration, pharmacy and engineering. There are 119 nursing staff members in the six departments under consideration.

The hospital has over the years faced numerous human resources challenges, notably excessive high attrition rates resulting from the economic meltdown in the country during the first decade of the 21st millennium. During the economic meltdown that Zimbabwe went through prior to the introduction of a government of national unity, the hospital experienced an exodus of critical staff to competitors within and outside the borders of the country. Health personnel have been leaving the sector in droves, citing among other factors poor remuneration, working and living conditions. The rising prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe has further strained the already overstretched health delivery system and lowered life expectancy. The lack of critical resources, such as protective clothing, and the perception of increased occupational risk from HIV and AIDS have compounded the problem. The high attrition rates and attendant, increased absenteeism have prompted the researchers to investigate the factors that are impacting on levels of staff engagement at the hospital in the light of the challenges highlighted above. The research is thus premised on the following questions:

- What factors affect the levels of staff engagement at Bindura Provincial Hospital?
- How does employee engagement impact employee involvement at Bindura Provincial Hospital?
- What strategies can be recommended for adoption by for Bindura Provincial Hospital, in a bid to address the concerns of an increasingly despondent staff?

The research is significant in that it provides useful insights regarding levels of staff engagement in the light of the high attrition levels currently being experienced at the hospital. Nursing, by its very nature, is a profession that requires high levels of staff engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee engagement is defined as heightened connection that an employee feels for his or her organization (Armstrong, 2000). Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”. Schaufeli and Baker (2004) defined employee engagement as positive fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigour (feeling energetic and resilience at work), dedicated (being proud of and happy about one’s work) and absorption (being totally immersed in one’s work). The cognitive aspect of employee engagement concerns employees’ beliefs about the organization, its leaders and working conditions. The emotional aspect concerns how employees feel about each of those three factors and whether they have positive or negative attitudes towards the organization and its leaders. Cognitive engagement means that employee are sure about their job requirements and role expectations whereas emotional engagement means that they receive timely feedback and social interactions with their co-workers, which make them feel connected to their organizational members. The physical aspect of employee engagement concerns the physical energies exerted by individuals to accomplish their roles. Most often employee engagement has been defined as emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization (Baumuk 2004, Richman 2006, and Shaw 2005), or the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their job (Frank 2004). Employee engagement can be in two forms which are emotional engagement and rational engagement. Emotional engagement is defined as to the extent to which employees derive pride, enjoyment, inspiration, or meaning from something or someone in the organization. Rational engagement is defined as to the extent to which employees feel that someone or something within their organizations provides financial, developmental or professional rewards that are in their best interests.

Employee engagement involves employee perceptions and values. Macey and Schneider (2008) express employee engagement as the positive perception employees have about their job as well as the motivation and effort they put into work. It denotes the extent to which an employee thinks and feels about the organization as being proactive in relation to achieving organizational goals, customers, colleagues and other stakeholders (Cooks 2008). The concept of employee engagement entails a variable situation that brings to light each individual’s distinctive personal relationship with the job and organization. Fleming and Asplund (2007) explain that employee engagement is the ability to capture the heads, hearts and souls of your employees to instil an intrinsic desire and passion for excellence. According to Scarlet (2005), engagement can vary in intensity with an individual’s degree of positive or negative emotional attachment to their organization, job and colleagues.

Engagement focuses on an individual’s degree of dedication to the organization and its mission. Engaged employees are absorbed intellectually and emotionally in their work and vigorously invest their best efforts to achieve the outcomes needed by the organization to achieve its goals. Seijts and Crim (2006), argued that engaged employees care about the future of their organizations and are willing to invest their discretionary effort- exceeding duty calls- to see that the organization succeeds. An engaged employee understands what to do to help his or her organization thrive, feels emotionally connected to the organization and its leaders, and is willing to put that knowledge and emotion into action to improve performance, their own and the organization’s (Gebaur et. al 2008). Organizations want engaged employees because they deliver improved performance.

The challenge of many organizations is to create an environment where employees understand and commit to the company's direction, strategy and goals. This requires coordinated efforts to ensure that a number of key elements are in place.

The CEO and senior executives set the tone for engagement in any organization. As a result their actions are critical in inspiring employees to go 'an extra mile'. There are various ways to get the senior leadership involved in the engagement process and these include communicating a clear vision of the future, building trust in the organization as well as including employees in the decision making processes on decisions that affect them. Line managers can provide a powerful force for mobilizing employees at every level of the organisation. They interact daily with the front-line employees and they can improve organizational performance if they are able to motivate their teams to align with the organization's strategy and achieve organization's goals. The line managers should also be able to empower employees to solve problems themselves and must also be able to follow through on promise and commitments. The supervisory- employee relationship is one of the factors that affect employee engagement. Researchers Reid and Crisp, (2007), Swindall (2007) and Wellins et. al (2005) and Cordock (2009) contend that employees do not leave organizations, but they leave bosses (states that arguably the most important relationship in any organization is the one between the employee and the supervisor. Wagner and Harter (2006) argue that the immediate supervisor is the single strongest influence on employees' engagement in their work and that supervisors have an enormous impact on their employees' commitment to the team, organization and the job.

The other factor influencing the level of employee engagement is the income gradient. According to Robinson (2003), an incentive to reward is a tried and tested way of boosting staff morale and enhancing engagement. If employees do not perceive that their pay and benefits are in the competitive range for industry and regional standards, employees may disengage. It is unlikely that employees will form a strong connection and commitment to the organization if they are unsatisfied with pay, benefits and the work environment.

A large part of building higher levels of employee engagement involves the creation of an environment in which employees feel valued and respected. Environment, culture and mood of the organization are critical factors in driving engagement. Organizations should create a people-centric culture. Organizations that are capable of building strong relationships between their leadership and employees are able to create a supportive people culture. Listening to employees' ideas and openly recognizing their value by acting on them are powerful approaches of building engagement. Creating an environment where employees have an impact on the decisions and actions that affect their jobs is very essential. Management need to formulate a philosophy that enables employees to contribute to the continuous improvement and ongoing success of the organization.

Effective communication with employees is also important for fostering employee engagement. Articulating the organizational vision for the future and being honest and straight forward in dealing with employees is critical. Leaders need to invest time and effort in communicating with the employees, and the employees are more likely to respect them and to believe that the leaders generate commitment and engagement. Effective communication fuels employee engagement about the organization's future and its progress towards goals (Watson 2007). The way in which leaders communicate with employees contributes towards making work meaningful and engaging effective communication promotes a sense of being a part of the team. Sanchez (2008) notes that in organizations with engaged workforces, information cascades down from top management to employees in a timely fashion, with processes established to build upward flow of information from employees to top management, creating a robust information exchange that builds a sense of involvement. Management needs to create an environment where people can act and communicate genuinely without fear of rejection or judgment. Ongoing feedback from the supervisor also affects the levels of employee engagement. Employees need to understand both current and long-term direction, as well as their role in it, to remain engaged. Good communication keeps employees apprised of the vision, strategy and goals as well as the success the organization is having.

Involving employees in the goal-setting process helps promote acceptance of challenging objectives, because people generally feel more committed to goals they help define (Vance 2006). When leaders actively communicate with employees to develop a job environment that leads to results, they are also facilitating employee commitment, empowerment and engagement. If employees are involved in creating the environment they are much more likely to support it. Involvement can be done through such things as weekly departmental meetings.

Job satisfaction and employee perceptions of job importance also influence the levels of employee engagement. An employee's attitude towards the job's importance and the organisation has the greatest impact on loyalty and

customer services (Serjts and Crim 2006). Employees have a perception of good professional working environment, skills utilization, professional and technical proficiency that allows for international recognition.

Career development or improvement opportunities also affect the levels of employee engagement. The organization should invest in people's learning and development. Career planning and internal promotion results in improvement in the levels of employee engagement. Learn and excel in their jobs, they commit to organisations that help them.

Individual differences also influence the levels of employee engagement. Kahn 1990, argued that psychological differences may impact on individual's ability to engage or disengage in their role, performance, just as they shape a person's ability and willingness to be involved or committed at work. If people experience unsafe conditions, it is a matter of individual differences what coping strategies to deploy, and the extent to which they engage or disengage (Porter 1996).

It is important to identify the levels of engagement in the organization and implement behavioural changes that will facilitate engagement (Seijts and Crim 2006). Assessing engagement trends and improvements over time allows for an adjustment in approach when necessary.

The other elements that are fundamental for employee engagement are strong leadership, accountability, autonomy and a sense of control over one's environment. According to Robinson (2003), employee engagement can be achieved through the creation of an organizational environment where positive emotions such as involvement and pride are encouraged, resulting in improved organizational performance, lower employee turnover and better health. West (2005) argues that when individuals feel positive emotions, they are able to think in a more flexible, open-minded way and are also likely to feel greater self-control, cope more effectively and be less defensive in the workplace.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to Sach (2006), stronger theoretical rationale for explaining employee engagement can be found in Social Exchange Theory (SET). The basis of SET is that obligations are generated through a series of interactions between parties who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence. A basic premise of the theory is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments as long as the parties abide by certain 'rules' of exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Such rules tend to involve reciprocity or repayment rules, so that the actions of one party lead to a response or actions by the other party. For example, when individuals receive economic and socio-emotional resources from their organization, they feel obliged to respond in kind and repay the organization.

SET provides a theoretical rationale for the reasons why employees choose to become more or less engaged in their work and organization. In terms of Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement, employees feel obliged to bring themselves more deeply into their role performances as repayment for the resources they receive from their organization. When the organization fails to provide these resources, individuals are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves from their roles. Thus, the amount of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources that an individual is prepared to devote in the performance of their work role may be contingent on the economic and socio-emotional resources received from the organization.

An alternative model of engagement is derived from the 'burnout' literature, which describes job engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout, noting that burnout involves the erosion of engagement with one's job (Maslach et al 2001). According to Maslach et al (ibid), six areas of work-life lead to either burnout or engagement: workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness and values. They argue that job engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work. Like burnout, engagement is expected to mediate the link between these six work-life factors and various work outcomes.

In the case of the health sector, the provision of meaningfulness to the job, coupled with requisite resources are essential for enhancing employee engagement. Appropriate recognition and rewards are also essential for promoting employee engagement. According to Kahn (ibid), the third and final key psychological factor of the engagement framework is availability. Kahn (ibid), described availability as the sense of possessing the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary to invest oneself in one's role at work. Employees need the essential resources which enable them to carry out their duties effectively, thus leaving them more likely to engage in their designated roles.

Kahn (ibid), describes meaningfulness as a feeling that one is receiving a return on one's involvement of oneself in one's work. Employees experience meaningfulness when they feel worthwhile, useful and valuable. Safety denotes another key psychological condition for engagement. His research indicates that employees feel a sense of safety in climates of openness and support, and when they feel connected to others. Safety occurs in environments where individuals are free to express themselves without fear or negative consequences.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research made use of the case study because such a design provided a detailed analysis and insights on the levels of staff engagement at Bindura Provincial Hospital. The target population in this study consists of the nursing staff at Bindura Provincial Hospital. A stratified random sampling procedure was used to select the sample for the study. A sampling frame was created from the list of all nursing in the eight departments (out-patients, female ward, male ward, children's ward, maternity ward, x-ray department, eye unit and dental) provided by the Human Resources Department . The target population was stratified into subgroups based on departments and subsequently every second member in the list was selected for inclusion in the sample. Due to limitations imposed by financial resources and time, it was found prudent to study only 59 (50%) of the nursing staff members out of a total of 119. The researcher made use of self- administered questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides as research instruments for purposes of data collection.

The research had the following confinements. The conceptual parameters related to factors associated with the levels of staff engagement while other factors that affect staff are outside the scope of the study. The research population involved the nursing staff and consequently all non-nursing staff at the hospital were outside the scope of the study. Geographically, research is confined to Bindura Provincial Hospital in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe, and covered the period 2009 to 2011. One of the major limitations of the study is that the Public service, under whose auspices the ministry and hospital fall, does not have the instruments of measuring employee engagement. Another major limitation was that the research was undertaken during a time when the country was going through an economic meltdown of unprecedented proportion purposes only. There was also the absence of a performance management culture and performance management system in public service.

5. RESULTS WITH TABLES

Findings are presented in the form of tables, pie charts and bar graphs. The data is then analyzed and interpreted.

Table 1 : Questionnaire Response Rate (n=47)

Distributed questionnaires	Response rate	Response rate percentage
59	47	79,6%

Source: Primary data

Table 1. above shows that the response rate for the questionnaires sent out was 79, 6%. This was a fairly high response rate, which can be taken to represent the views of the employees on the factors that affect levels of engagement.

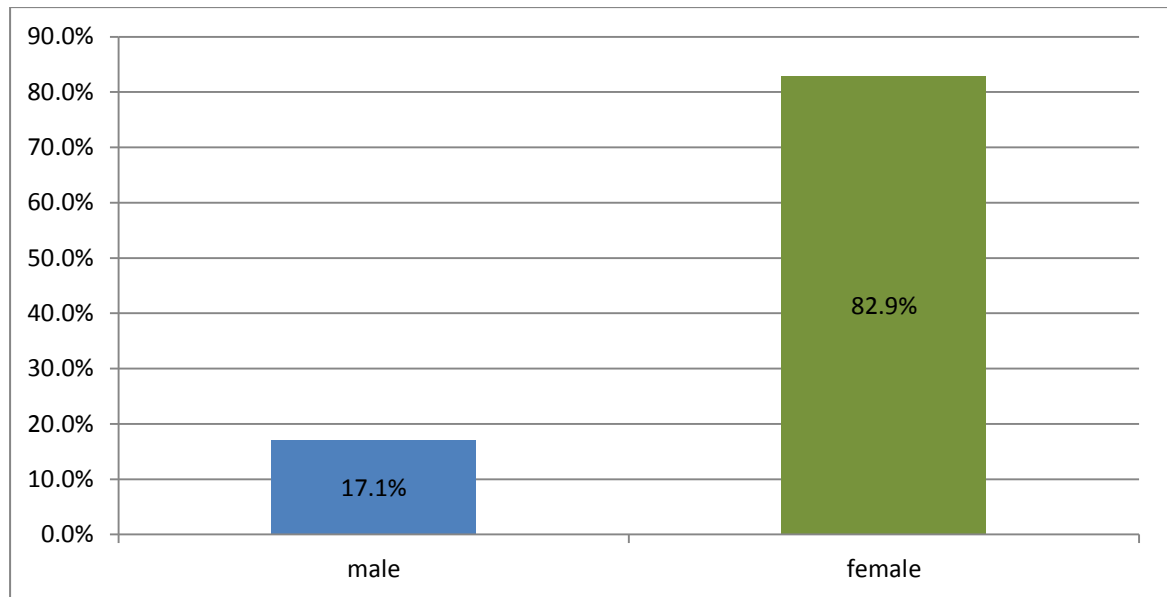
Table 2: Distribution of respondents by age group (responses n=47)

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
>20	0	0
20 to 30	9	19.1
31 to 40	31	65.9
41 to 50	4	8.5
51 +	3	6.4
Total	47	100

Source: primary data

Table 2. shows that 65.9% of the respondents are in the age group of 31-40. This situation reflects the demographic profile of nursing staff at the hospital, which is generally skewed in favour of this particular age category.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of respondents by gender (n=47)



Source: Primary data

Table 3. shows that 82.9% of the respondents were female, while male nurses in the sample contributed 17.1%. This is also a reflection of gender staff at Bindura Provincial Hospital which is heavily skewed in favour of the female gender. The responses contained in this analysis are thus likely to be influenced by the gender balance inherent in the sample.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents by their positions in the organisation (n=47)

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General nurses	38	80.9
Sister-In –charge	9	19.1
Total	47	100

Source: primary data

The table above shows that 80.9% of respondents are nurses (n=38) whilst 19.1 % (n=9) are sisters-in-charge. This finding implies that most of the responses were obtained from the general nurses who do the bulk of the work, rather than from the sister-in -charges who are mainly concerned with supervisory functions.

Table 5. Distribution of respondents by working experience as a nurses

Working experience	Frequency	Percentage
0-5 years	17	36.2
6-10	22	46.8
11-15	2	4.25
16-20	4	8.5
21+	2	4.25
Total	47	100

Source: primary data

The table above shows that 36.2% of the employees have working experience ranging between 0 and 5 years. Nine of the respondents have got working experience of 11 years and above.

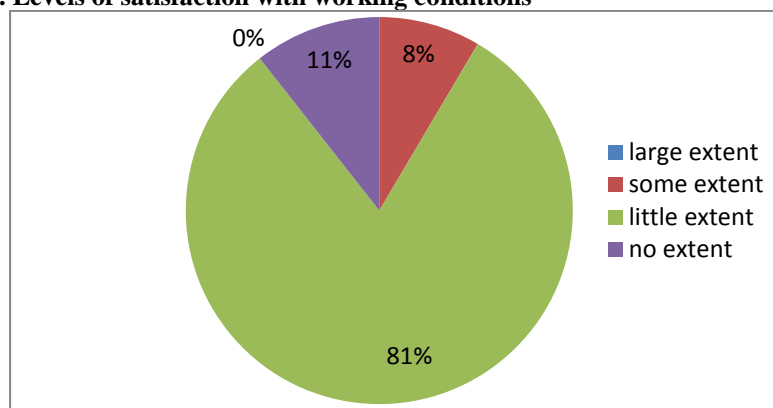
Table 6. Factors influencing respondents' levels of employee engagement

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
a. Opportunities for further development	47	100
b. Promotion opportunities	15	31.9
c. Supervisors' relationships with colleagues	38	80.8
d. Internal communication	41	87.2
e. Relationship with colleagues	16	34
f. Clearly defined goals and objectives, mission and vision	7	14.8
g. Leadership styles	35	74.4
h. Remuneration and benefits	33	70.2

Source: primary data

The main factors identified as being critical determinants of respondents' levels of engagement were identified as opportunities for further development . internal communication supervisors' relationships with colleagues and leadership styles while clearly defined goals and objectives, mission and vision as well as promotion opportunities were given little consideration..

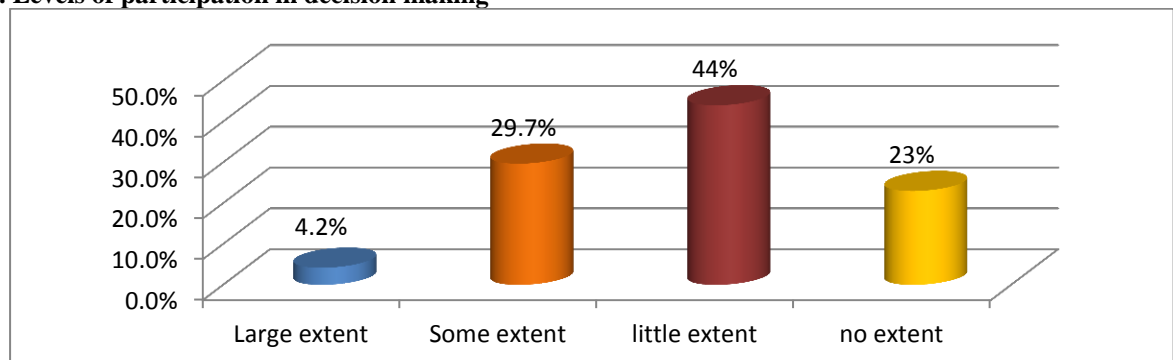
Table 7. Levels of satisfaction with working conditions



Source: Primary data

The pie chart 4.2 above clearly indicates that the majority of the staff is not satisfied with the working conditions at Bindura Provincial Hospital.80.9% indicated that they are satisfied to a little extent, 8.5% indicated that they are satisfied to some extent, with 10.6% indicating that they are not satisfied at all with their working conditions.

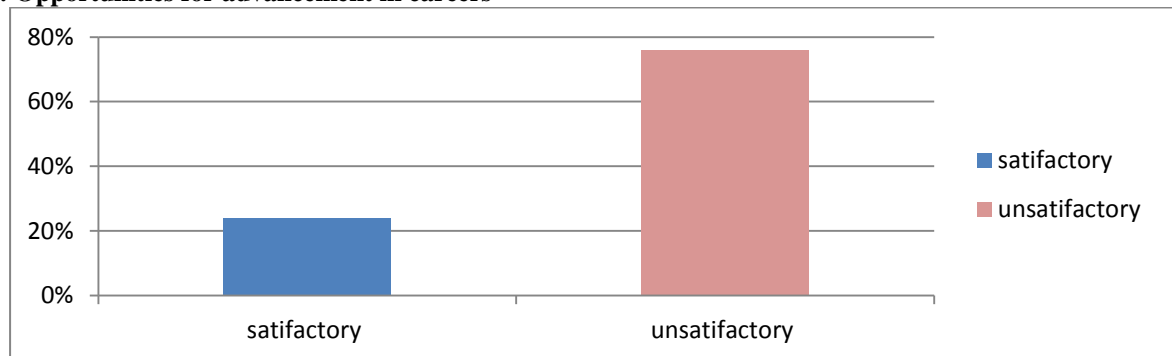
Table 8. Levels of participation in decision making



Source: Primary data

Table 8 above shows that 4.2% of the respondents believe they are largely involved in decision making on significant issues that affect them, while 29.7% believe they somehow participate in such decision making processes. 23% of respondents felt they are marginalised from decision making processes in the organisation.

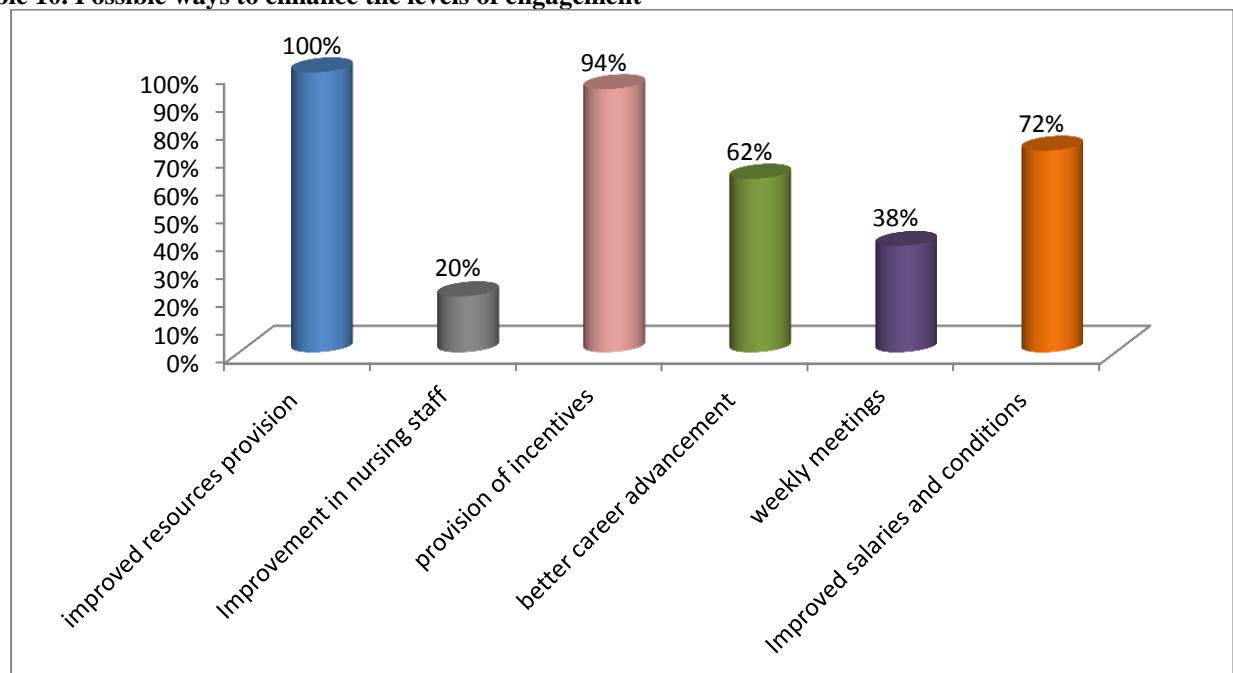
Table 9: Opportunities for advancement in careers



Source: Primary data

Table 8. above showed that 76% of the respondents rate the opportunities for advancement in careers at Bindura Provincial Hospital as unsatisfactory whilst 24% agreed that the opportunities are satisfactory.

Table 10. Possible ways to enhance the levels of engagement



Source: Primary data

Improvements in working conditions, the provision of incentives and improved salaries and conditions were cited by the majority of respondents as areas that warrant attention. Nursing staffing levels and weekly meetings were the least cited strategies for improving staff engagement levels at the hospital.

6. FINDINGS

The massive flight of nursing professionals during the first decade of the twenty first millennium due to the economic challenges that the country went through had a telling effect on staffing levels at the hospital. Remuneration had been cited as a major reason for such moves. According to respondents, the major human resources challenges confronting the provincial hospital were the loss of skilled staff to local, regional and international competitors. The hospital has suffered a heavy blow as a result of the massive brain drain since 2000. Most of the nursing staff is leaving the hospital to join the private sector. Some of them are leaving to join the nearby private hospitals such as Shashi Hospital and Ponai Clinic. Other major destinations for the nursing staff included South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and

Canada. Information obtained from the exit interviews carried out from a random sample of 18 exit interview documents revealed that 70% of the respondents had left the organization for greener pastures and better opportunities in and outside the country. The high attrition rates of nursing staff is attributable to declining economic conditions and reduced expenditure allocation by the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare. The other human resource challenge is low morale and low levels of motivation of the nursing staff of the workforce. The low levels of morale and motivation are being caused by low remuneration and the poor working conditions in the health sector. This also resulted in heightened levels of feelings of lack of engagement by the hospital nursing staff with the resultant poor quality service delivery levels.

Another factor influencing the levels of nursing staff's engagement at Bindura Provincial Hospital is remuneration. Remuneration in the Public Service, under whose auspices the Ministry of Health falls, is generally low as compared to those of private sector organisations. Nurses in the private sector and in the region are paid more favourably than those in the Zimbabwean Public Service thereby making the hospital's salaries uncompetitive in the industry. In a bid to address the problem of high attrition in the health sector, the Global Fund, was assisting the Zimbabwean Government, through the payment of monthly financial incentives to all government employed nurses.

The other factor influencing the levels of engagement are the working conditions. There are perennial problems affecting the public health system that stem from the economic difficulties leading to very low funding of health services and the deterioration of infrastructure at the hospital. The nursing staff also highlighted the availability of resources such as drugs as another factor influencing the levels of employee engagement of the nursing staff at Bindura Provincial Hospital. Chronic shortages of essential medical supplies are lowering the levels of employee engagement at the hospital.

The staff complement levels at the hospital, which is characterised by a high vacancy ratio, is another factor influencing the levels of engagement of nursing staff. The shortage of nurses tends to put a strain on the remaining nurses and this results in reduced levels of engagement. The high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in the country has also further strained an already overstretched health delivery system.

7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The study set out to analyze the factors that affect the levels of employee engagement at Bindura Provincial Hospital. Remuneration levels being paid to nurses in the private sector are more attractive than those being paid in the public sector. A nurse in the public sector is being paid about \$400 whilst the one in the private sector is getting something close to \$1000 per month. The salary differences lower the levels of staff engagement for the staff in public hospitals.

The lack of protective clothing and the fear of increased occupational risks from HIV and AIDS when working in the public health sector results in low levels of engagement. The medical superintendent at Bindura Provincial Hospital should ensure that proper resources are provided to allow employees to effectively perform their duties. Conditions of services, issues like remuneration, supervision style and the general working conditions were found to be a source of dissatisfaction which in turn lowers staff engagement levels.

In view of the findings in this study, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. The Health Services Board should review nurses' pay and benefits allowances such as night duty and on call allowances paid to the public health workers on a regular basis in order to motivate them to carry out their duties efficiently. Non-monetary incentives must be put in place.
2. Improvements in the complement of nursing staff is likely to impact positively on levels of staff engagement through addressing the overworking currently being experienced by the nursing staff at the hospital.
3. There is need for the provision of adequate resources such as protective clothing, essential drugs and equipment. Management at Bindura Provincial Hospital needs to embrace a philosophy that enables employees to contribute to the continuous improvement and ongoing success of the organisation through enhanced staff participation in different fora such as regular weekly and monthly meetings.
4. Opportunities for development and growth should be availed to all employees, including specific training needed for their current job and wider skill development.
5. Bindura Provincial Hospital should make use of the quantitative surveys, supported by qualitative interviews and focus groups to measure employee engagement levels.

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