

BUILDING BRIDGES: FOSTERING POSITIVE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS FOR ENHANCED TEAMWORK

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Abstract: This study investigates the pivotal role of interpersonal relationships in enhancing teamwork among staff at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo. Drawing on the Social Exchange Theory, the research explores how effective communication, active listening, and empathy collectively influence the dynamics of collaboration within academic and administrative environments. Using a structured questionnaire administered to 100 purposively selected staff members, the study employed descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses via SPSS v26. Findings reveal that all three interpersonal variables are positively and significantly related to teamwork, with empathy emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$), followed by effective communication ($\beta = 0.38$) and active listening ($\beta = 0.29$). The results underscore the critical importance of fostering emotionally intelligent behaviours and relational competencies in academic institutions. The study recommends regular interpersonal skills training, emotional intelligence coaching for leaders, digital communication reforms, and structured mentorship programmes. These initiatives are essential for cultivating a harmonious, inclusive, and performance-driven university workforce. Ultimately, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge emphasizing that positive interpersonal relationships are not optional extras but strategic tools for institutional effectiveness and staff well-being.

Keywords: *Interpersonal relationships, Teamwork, Effective communication, Empathy, Active listening.*

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Introduction

The success of any organization particularly within the education sector hinges largely on the strength and quality of interpersonal relationships among its members and the capacity of staff to function effectively as a cohesive unit. In higher institutions of learning, where collaboration across diverse cadres, academic, administrative, technical, and support staff is fundamental to institutional performance, the ability to foster and maintain positive interpersonal dynamics cannot be overstated. The interdependence of roles and the complexity of operations within universities make mutual understanding, respect, and synergy among employees indispensable.

Universities are microcosms of broader society, often characterized by diversity in terms of gender, background, professional orientation, values, and generational perspectives. This diversity, while enriching, can also give rise to friction and communication gaps if not properly managed. The day-to-day operations in educational institutions from curriculum delivery and research execution to facility maintenance and student support require not just procedural compliance but also healthy human relationships. Hence, a harmonious work environment built on trust, shared values, and effective communication becomes crucial to fostering productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational success.

A body of scholarly work emphasizes that effective communication, active listening, and emotional intelligence are foundational to building and sustaining positive workplace relationships. Johnson and Hackman (2023), assert that organizations that deliberately promote interpersonal trust and open dialogue tend to experience higher levels of engagement, cooperation, and collective achievement. Goleman (2023), further highlights emotional intelligence as a pivotal factor, arguing that leaders and staff members who are self-aware, empathetic, and responsive in their communication styles are better positioned to lead teams, resolve conflicts, and cultivate morale. These interpersonal competencies are no longer "soft skills"; they are now recognized as strategic assets in today's knowledge-driven and team-based workplaces.

Yet, despite the recognized importance of strong interpersonal relationships, many organizations including those in the education sector continue to grapple with various relational challenges. The modern workplace is increasingly fast-paced, high-pressured, and culturally diverse, conditions that can strain human connections if emotional and social competencies are lacking. Communication breakdowns, lack of empathy, misinterpretation of intentions, power dynamics, and inadequate listening habits frequently result in misunderstandings, distrust, and low team cohesion (Martins & O'Connor, 2023). These challenges are often



compounded in public institutions, where bureaucratic procedures, resource constraints, and hierarchical barriers can suppress open dialogue and frustrate collaborative efforts.

In the Nigerian higher education context, these interpersonal challenges are particularly pronounced due to systemic issues such as understaffing, poor remuneration, infrastructural deficits, and the lingering effects of industrial disputes. Within this context, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, stands as a case in point. While the university continues to play a strategic role in teacher education and academic development, it has not been insulated from the interpersonal difficulties that plague many Nigerian institutions. Staff members across various departments sometimes encounter strained working relationships marked by poor communication, limited collaboration, suspicion, and inadequate emotional engagement. These relational dysfunctions not only affect productivity but can also lead to low morale, increased absenteeism, poor service delivery, and diminished institutional reputation.

Moreover, unresolved interpersonal issues can escalate into more serious organizational problems, such as workplace hostility, inefficiency in interdepartmental functions, and even staff turnover. In environments where teamwork is essential for innovation, curriculum development, and academic excellence, these problems become major barriers to institutional growth. It is therefore imperative that institutions like Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, develop intentional strategies to strengthen workplace relationships and foster a culture of empathy, openness, and emotional maturity.

Against this background, this paper seeks to critically explore the role of interpersonal relationship-building in enhancing teamwork and overall institutional performance. Specifically, it investigates how key interpersonal skills, effective communication, active listening, and empathy can be developed and applied among university staff to reduce workplace tension and foster collaboration. It aims to identify practical, context-specific solutions that can transform interpersonal dynamics and create a more productive and emotionally intelligent organizational climate. Ultimately, enhancing interpersonal relationships is not only about improving staff wellbeing, it is about achieving the strategic goals of the university through a united and cooperative workforce.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the role of effective communication in building positive workplace relationships.
- Assess how active listening contributes to enhanced teamwork.
- Analyze the impact of empathy on strengthening workplace bonds.
- Recommend strategies for fostering positive interpersonal relationships to improve teamwork.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- How does effective communication influence interpersonal relationships and teamwork?

- What is the contribution of active listening to teamwork efficiency?
- In what ways does empathy strengthen workplace relationships?
- What strategies can organizations implement to foster positive interpersonal relationships?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated:

- **H01:** Effective communication does not significantly influence interpersonal relationships and teamwork.
- **H02:** Active listening does not significantly contribute to teamwork efficiency.
- **H03:** Empathy does not significantly strengthen workplace relationships.

Operational Definition of Terms

- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Social connections between individuals in the workplace characterized by communication, trust, and collaboration.
- **Teamwork:** Cooperative effort by a group of individuals working together to achieve common goals.
- **Effective Communication:** The clear and accurate exchange of information, ideas, and feedback.
- **Active Listening:** The full concentration, understanding, response, and remembering of what is being said.
- **Empathy:** The ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of others.

Literature Review

In contemporary organizational discourse, the significance of interpersonal relationships has garnered increasing attention as a critical factor in achieving high performance, fostering a harmonious work environment, and ensuring long-term institutional sustainability. As organizations evolve in structure and complexity, especially in the context of globalization, technological innovation, and workforce diversity, the quality of interactions among individuals becomes a central determinant of success. Interpersonal relationships, defined by mutual respect, open communication, empathy, and trust, not only influence individual behaviour and job satisfaction but also shape the broader organizational culture and climate.

This dynamic is particularly evident in educational institutions, where the interplay between various stakeholders, academic staff, non-teaching staff, management, and students requires continuous collaboration and mutual understanding. In universities, the seamless delivery of educational services and the achievement of strategic objectives depend significantly on the ability of academic and administrative units to function cohesively. Productive interpersonal relationships among staff members enhance institutional coordination, reduce conflict, promote shared decision-making, and enable the achievement of common goals. Poor relational dynamics, on the other hand, can undermine efficiency, foster division, and compromise educational quality.

This literature review therefore explores the critical elements that underpin healthy interpersonal relationships in organizational settings, with particular focus on three core variables: effective communication, active listening, and empathy. These constructs are not only vital tools for managing interpersonal dynamics but also serve as strategic enablers of employee engagement, team cohesion, and institutional effectiveness. The review systematically examines how these relational competencies contribute to organizational performance, drawing from current academic literature and empirical evidence. To provide a robust theoretical grounding, the discussion is framed within the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET), which offers a foundational perspective on how reciprocal and mutually beneficial interactions influence behaviour and relationships within organizations.

Effective Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

Effective communication is widely acknowledged as the bedrock of strong interpersonal relationships and serves as a central mechanism for coordination, decision-making, and conflict resolution within organizational structures. In both theory and practice, it encompasses more than just the exchange of words, it entails the ability to transmit, receive, interpret, and respond to messages in ways that foster clarity, alignment, and mutual understanding. It involves verbal and non-verbal cues, written and oral exchanges, and symbolic gestures that collectively shape how individuals relate to one another in the workplace.

In organizational contexts, particularly in complex systems like universities, effective communication plays a pivotal role in facilitating task integration, departmental coordination, and interprofessional collaboration. It ensures that the right information reaches the right people at the right time, thereby minimizing ambiguity and enhancing operational efficiency. Robbins and Judge (2023), conceptualize effective communication as the ability to convey messages in a manner that is not only clear and understandable but also encourages reciprocal interaction, active engagement, and constructive feedback. This definition emphasizes communication as a dynamic, two-way process, one that promotes open dialogue, shared meaning, and continuous feedback loops.

Importantly, effective communication serves as a catalyst for building trust, transparency, and mutual respect among organizational members. When individuals communicate openly and respectfully, they create a psychologically safe environment that empowers others to share ideas, voice concerns, and participate in collective decision-making. This sense of inclusion and shared ownership enhances morale, reduces resistance to change, and strengthens overall organizational cohesion.

In the University setting, the role of communication becomes even more nuanced and strategic. Institutions of higher learning operate through a network of interdependent units, faculties, departments, research centers, administrative offices, and student affairs, each with distinct but interrelated responsibilities. Ensuring alignment between these units requires continuous communication that is both vertically and horizontally structured. According to Shaw et al. (2023), a culture of effective communication in universities significantly reduces intra-institutional conflict, fosters interdepartmental collaboration, and enhances staff morale. In such environments, employees whether academic, administrative, or technical feel better informed, more connected, and more willing to contribute meaningfully to institutional development.

Moreover, effective communication is indispensable to transformational leadership within educational institutions. Leaders who are adept at communicating not only disseminate information but also inspire, influence, and mobilize collective action. They provide vision, articulate institutional priorities, and create platforms for inclusive dialogue and problem-solving. Such communication fosters organizational trust and reinforces leadership credibility. On the contrary, miscommunication or the lack of timely, transparent, and empathetic communication can lead to role ambiguity, employee dissatisfaction, task duplication, and even conflict escalation.

Furthermore, in times of institutional crisis or organizational change, such as leadership transitions, policy shifts, or technological innovations, effective communication becomes a strategic tool for managing resistance and uncertainty. Institutions that invest in clear communication protocols and regular feedback mechanisms are better positioned to navigate challenges while maintaining staff confidence and engagement.

Effective communication is not merely a functional necessity but a strategic asset that shapes the quality of relationships, the efficiency of operations, and the overall health of an organization. Its absence can create silos, disconnection, and dysfunction; its presence, on the other hand, promotes alignment, resilience, and collective success.

Active Listening and Team Dynamics

While often considered a subset of effective communication, active listening warrants recognition as a distinct and critical interpersonal competency that significantly influences organizational cohesion and productivity. Unlike passive hearing, active listening involves the deliberate and conscious effort to focus on, interpret, and respond appropriately to verbal and nonverbal cues from a speaker. It requires a heightened level of attentiveness, emotional sensitivity, and a genuine intention to understand not merely to reply. Active listening encompasses a range of behaviours including maintaining eye contact, offering verbal affirmations, paraphrasing to confirm understanding, asking clarifying questions, and demonstrating empathy through body language and tone.

Active listening plays a transformational role in team dynamics, particularly in organizational settings where collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual respect are prerequisites for success. Brown and Miller (2022), argue that active listening is a core behaviour in effective teams, enabling equitable participation and inclusive decision-making. In diverse work groups, where members may vary in role, status, background, or expertise, the ability to listen actively to one another helps minimize hierarchical tension, reduce communication breakdowns, and build interpersonal trust. When team members feel that their voices are genuinely heard and considered, they become more engaged, motivated, and committed to team goals.

In the context of higher education institutions, where governance and operational structures are often complex and bureaucratic, active listening becomes even more essential. Universities bring together a variety of stakeholders; academic faculty, non-teaching staff, students, labor unions, and administrators, each with unique interests, perspectives, and expectations. Active listening serves as a bridge across these diverse interests, promoting mutual understanding and fostering a

sense of shared ownership over institutional challenges and solutions. Lavelle and Bardach (2023), emphasize the need to institutionalize active listening by embedding it into leadership development programmes, staff training initiatives, and everyday organizational culture. Their research shows that institutions which formally train their workforce in active listening skills experience greater emotional intelligence, improved team performance, and reduced interpersonal conflict.

Moreover, active listening is foundational to psychological safety in the workplace, a concept that refers to an individual's perception that they can speak up, share ideas, or express concerns without fear of humiliation, dismissal, or retribution. Psychological safety is critical to fostering innovation, continuous learning, and adaptive problem-solving hallmarks of what Senge (1990) terms the "learning organization." When staff members trust that their contributions will be respected and valued, they are more likely to engage in creative thinking, raise important issues, and participate in feedback processes. This, in turn, enhances organizational resilience and adaptability in the face of change.

In team-based settings, active listening also contributes to conflict prevention and resolution. By encouraging open dialogue, reducing misunderstandings, and acknowledging different perspectives, active listening creates an environment where disagreements are addressed constructively rather than suppressed or escalated. It is particularly effective in managing culturally diverse teams, where differing communication styles, assumptions, and expectations can lead to misinterpretations or perceived slights. Leaders who model and cultivate active listening set the tone for respectful and inclusive dialogue, ensuring that team interactions remain constructive and goal-oriented.

Active listening is far more than a soft skill; it is a strategic organizational asset that underpins effective teamwork, fosters inclusive leadership, and strengthens institutional culture. Especially in complex environments such as universities, where collaborative governance is essential, active listening enhances relational harmony, improves decision-making quality, and contributes to the broader mission of academic excellence and institutional sustainability.

Empathy and the Quality of Workplace Relationships

Empathy, the ability to recognize, understand, and respond compassionately to the emotions and perspectives of others, is a cornerstone of effective interpersonal relationships and a vital competency in modern organizational life. Unlike sympathy, which merely acknowledges another's hardship, empathy involves a deeper emotional resonance and the capacity to see situations through another's lens. In organizational settings, empathy is increasingly recognized as a strategic social skill that enhances communication, strengthens trust, and fosters a supportive workplace culture.

In workplaces characterized by diverse roles, backgrounds, and expectations, such as universities, empathy serves as a buffer against misunderstandings, prejudice, and interdepartmental conflict. It enables individuals to relate across disciplinary and hierarchical boundaries, promoting inclusive dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. Empathy facilitates the humanization of interactions, allowing employees to feel understood and valued not just as workers but as individuals with unique emotional and psychological needs.

Goleman (2023), a leading scholar in emotional intelligence, identifies empathy as a core element of emotionally intelligent behaviour and a defining trait of transformational leadership. Empathetic leaders are more attuned to the emotional climate of their teams and are better equipped to support staff during times of stress, change, or uncertainty. Such leaders do not only respond to the spoken concerns of their employees but also pick up on unspoken cues tone, body language, or emotional fatigue and act preemptively to address them. This enhances relational transparency and psychological well-being among employees, which in turn boosts morale and productivity.

In academic institutions where organizational success hinges on the smooth interplay between academic and administrative units empathy assumes even greater importance. The presence of multiple stakeholder groups (faculty, non-teaching staff, students, alumni, and regulatory bodies) means that institutional processes are often shaped by complex interpersonal dynamics and power structures. Leaders and team members who exhibit empathy are better able to navigate these dynamics with sensitivity and tact, mitigating potential friction and fostering a shared sense of purpose. For instance, empathetic administrators are more likely to engage in consultative decision-making, accommodate diverse work styles, and recognize the personal and professional challenges faced by staff and students alike.

Huang and Liu (2023), provide empirical evidence of the positive correlation between empathetic leadership and employee outcomes in tertiary institutions. Their research found that when employees perceive their supervisors as empathetic and emotionally supportive, there is a marked increase in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall engagement. Notably, empathy was also associated with lower levels of burnout, reduced turnover intentions, and higher levels of workplace loyalty, suggesting that emotional connectivity between leaders and subordinates contributes significantly to organizational stability and resilience.

Furthermore, empathy contributes to the creation of a psychologically safe environment, where employees feel free to voice their opinions, express concerns, and admit mistakes without fear of retribution. This is particularly important in learning institutions where innovation, reflection, and continuous improvement are central to institutional growth. A culture infused with empathy encourages open feedback, fosters professional development, and promotes collaborative learning among colleagues, all of which are essential to knowledge creation and dissemination.

Additionally, empathy is instrumental in managing intergenerational and cross-cultural teams commonly found in universities. As institutions become more globalized, employees bring with them varied experiences, cultural norms, and generational values. Empathy enables individuals to suspend judgment and engage meaningfully with perspectives that differ from their own, thereby enhancing inclusivity and reducing unconscious bias. It also equips staff and faculty to respond constructively to student needs, especially in cases involving emotional distress, academic anxiety, or personal challenges.

Empathy is far more than an interpersonal nicety; it is a transformational capacity that fosters positive workplace relationships, enhances leadership effectiveness, and strengthens institutional culture. Universities and other educational institutions

that embed empathy into their leadership development, staff engagement practices, and communication frameworks are more likely to cultivate collaborative, resilient, and high-performing organizational communities.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies across various organizational contexts, particularly in educational institutions, have increasingly affirmed the interconnected and synergistic effects of effective communication, active listening, and empathy on organizational outcomes such as employee engagement, teamwork, institutional efficiency, and overall performance. These interpersonal variables are not merely peripheral to organizational functioning; they serve as strategic levers for driving performance, strengthening relationships, and fostering sustainable institutional growth. This section presents a synthesis of recent empirical findings that demonstrate the practical significance of these relational competencies.

Effective Communication and Organizational Efficiency

Effective communication has been empirically validated as a foundational driver of workplace coordination, trust-building, and strategic alignment. Martins and O'Connor (2023), in a mixed-method study conducted across three Nigerian universities, investigated the impact of communication training on administrative efficiency and institutional performance. The study employed both quantitative metrics and qualitative interviews to assess the outcomes of structured communication practices. The findings revealed that departments with clear and standardized communication protocols recorded a 28% increase in team coordination, a 22% decrease in internal conflicts, and faster turnaround time in policy implementation and decision-making. Staff satisfaction surveys further indicated that employees in departments with better communication frameworks reported higher morale and improved clarity in role expectations.

In a complementary study, Adeleke et al. (2022), surveyed 210 academic and non-teaching staff in public universities to determine the relationship between communication dynamics and staff motivation. The results demonstrated that horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (superior-subordinate) communication significantly influenced organizational commitment and work enthusiasm. Staff who reported frequent, transparent, and two-way communication with their supervisors exhibited higher levels of motivation and a stronger sense of belonging to the institution. The authors emphasized that communication clarity and feedback receptiveness were more predictive of staff loyalty than even financial incentives.

Active Listening and Team Cohesion

Empirical evidence also strongly supports the notion that active listening is critical for enhancing team cohesion, fostering inclusion, and improving interpersonal trust in institutional settings. Lavelle and Bardach (2023), conducted a longitudinal field experiment in which active listening training programmes were implemented in academic faculties and administrative departments. Pre- and post-training assessments revealed that departments that adopted listening-focused interventions experienced a 35% increase in team cohesion, fewer interpersonal grievances, and greater trust among co-workers. In particular, team members reported feeling more "heard," respected, and understood,

which translated into improved interpersonal dynamics and higher levels of task collaboration.

Supporting these findings, Eze and Olowokere (2022), examined the role of listening culture in employee engagement across five higher education institutions in Nigeria. Their study showed that organizations that cultivated a listening environment saw a 25% improvement in employee retention and greater voluntary participation in interdepartmental initiatives. The researchers found that listening culture acted as a mediator between leadership style and employee collaboration, suggesting that leadership receptiveness to employee input is a vital determinant of institutional cohesion.

Empathy and Employee Engagement

The role of empathy in shaping employee perceptions and organizational commitment has also been the subject of rigorous empirical analysis. Huang and Liu (2023), conducted a longitudinal survey involving 420 university employees, aimed at understanding the influence of empathic leadership on job outcomes. Their analysis revealed that empathic leadership was a strong predictor of employee engagement, explaining 48% of the variance in key outcomes such as organizational loyalty, job satisfaction, and perceived workplace support. The study underscored that staff who viewed their leaders as understanding and emotionally attuned were more likely to go beyond their formal duties and remain committed even during institutional transitions or challenges.

Similarly, Okon and Ajayi (2021), reported that in higher education settings, leaders with high levels of empathic behaviour were consistently rated as more effective by subordinates. Their study, which included both faculty and administrative staff across federal universities in southern Nigeria, found that teams led by empathetic supervisors scored significantly higher on performance appraisals and demonstrated greater resilience during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Empathy was linked to inclusive decision-making, reduced employee stress levels, and higher innovation scores in collaborative projects.

Integrated Implications

Collectively, these empirical findings underscore the interactive nature of effective communication, active listening, and empathy in enhancing organizational dynamics. They reveal that these interpersonal strategies do not function in isolation; rather, they reinforce each other in a synergistic loop that improves workplace harmony, institutional responsiveness, and employee well-being. For instance, effective communication sets the stage for active listening, while active listening deepens empathy and mutual respect each step reinforcing the next.

In the context of universities and higher education institutions, where operational complexity and stakeholder diversity are high, these relational strategies are crucial for sustaining a culture of collaborative governance, psychological safety, and continuous improvement. Institutions that invest in these competencies through training, policy development, and leadership modeling are better positioned to achieve not only higher performance but also enduring staff loyalty and institutional resilience.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in Social Exchange Theory (SET), originally advanced by Blau (1964), which posits that human relationships are driven by a cost-benefit analysis wherein individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs through their interactions. SET suggests that social behaviour, including workplace interactions, evolves through a process of reciprocal exchange where individuals evaluate the fairness, balance, and mutual gain inherent in their relationships. In essence, individuals are more likely to maintain relationships that offer emotional, psychological, or instrumental benefits in return for their own contributions.

At its core, SET assumes that interpersonal exchanges are voluntary, yet influenced by the expectation of reciprocity and mutual benefit. This principle can be applied to workplace dynamics where employees engage with colleagues and superiors based on perceived relational balance. The theory implies that when individuals receive positive relational inputs such as respect, support, effective communication, active listening, and empathy they are inclined to reciprocate through cooperation, trust, loyalty, and higher job performance.

In the context of university work environments, which are often marked by role diversity, hierarchical layers, and collaborative demands, SET provides a compelling framework to understand how the quality of interpersonal relationships influences organizational behaviour and performance. When staff members, both academic and non-teaching, experience a culture of open communication and empathetic engagement, they perceive the workplace as fair, inclusive, and rewarding. These perceptions trigger positive behavioural responses, such as enhanced job satisfaction, stronger team cohesion, and greater willingness to invest in institutional objectives.

More specifically, effective communication within SET is viewed as a mechanism of social investment, whereby clarity, transparency, and timely feedback foster a sense of shared purpose. It is not simply the act of transferring information, but a relational act that signals respect and trustworthiness both of which are core currencies in social exchange. When managers and staff communicate openly and listen actively, they create a relational surplus that encourages cooperation and reduces the likelihood of resistance, conflict, or disengagement.

Active listening, another pillar of this study, aligns with SET by reinforcing the idea of psychological reciprocity. Employees who feel genuinely listened to are more likely to feel psychologically safe, emotionally connected, and valued. This, in turn, inspires greater organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) such as voluntary collaboration, initiative-taking, and constructive feedback, critical components of a high-functioning university workforce.

Similarly, empathy operates as a powerful relational resource within the SET framework. Empathetic interactions communicate emotional understanding and recognition, contributing to relational satisfaction and organizational commitment. Leaders who demonstrate empathy foster a culture of care and fairness, prompting subordinates to respond with increased dedication and reduced turnover intention. According to SET, these relational exchanges though intangible carry high

perceived value, particularly in emotionally complex environments like higher education institutions.

Importantly, SET also accounts for the negative outcomes of poor relational exchange. When employees perceive that their emotional or cognitive investments are not reciprocated due to communication breakdowns, indifference, or lack of appreciation they may withdraw from the relationship or reduce their level of engagement. This withdrawal may manifest as apathy, absenteeism, or even turnover. Thus, relational imbalance, or the perception of being exploited in the exchange, undermines trust and reduces organizational commitment.

Furthermore, the theory offers insight into long-term relational sustainability. Unlike transactional exchanges, which are immediate and often economic in nature, social exchanges are relational and cumulative. Over time, consistent acts of empathy, listening, and effective communication contribute to a reservoir of trust that stabilizes the work environment and buffers the organization against internal crises or external shocks.

Social Exchange Theory provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the interpersonal processes that shape employee behaviour, motivation, and performance. By conceptualizing communication, active listening, and empathy as relational currencies, SET elucidates how these elements foster reciprocal trust, mutual respect, and sustained engagement. In applying SET to the university context, this study seeks to explain how high-quality interpersonal relationships can generate productive, harmonious, and resilient organizational systems, ultimately contributing to institutional effectiveness and sustainability.

Summary of Literature

The literature affirms that effective communication, active listening, and empathy are not only essential interpersonal skills but also strategic assets in building strong organizational cultures. These elements are crucial in educational institutions, where diverse roles, responsibilities, and interests intersect.

Empirical studies consistently show that improving these variables enhances team performance, employee satisfaction, trust, and institutional effectiveness. When interpreted through Social Exchange Theory, these dynamics reflect the principle that relationships, like economic transactions, must be nurtured through consistent, fair, and reciprocal exchanges.

Universities aiming for sustainable development must, therefore, prioritize the cultivation of positive interpersonal relationships among staff, guided by deliberate leadership, capacity-building initiatives, and a workplace culture rooted in mutual respect and collaboration.

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted at Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED), Ondo, Nigeria. AFUED is one of Nigeria's foremost institutions for teacher education and academic training, with a diverse workforce comprising academic, administrative, health and technical staff. The University provides a dynamic and multifaceted environment where interpersonal relationships between various staff categories significantly influence organizational harmony, service delivery, and educational

outcomes. The choice of AFUED as the study site is strategic due to its mix of professional roles, hierarchical structures, and communication dynamics that make it ideal for investigating the variables under study.

Population of the Study

The target population consisted of all academic and non-teaching staff of the university. This includes lecturers, departmental administrators, Registry staff, security personnel, health personnel, technical officers, librarians, and other support staff who contribute to the functioning of the institution. The inclusion of both academic and non-teaching personnel ensures a holistic examination of workplace relationships across all functional units of the University.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 100 staff members were selected as the study sample. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure that participants were drawn from both academic and non-teaching divisions, and that only individuals with at least one year of work experience in the institution were included. This approach was used to ensure that respondents had sufficient exposure to the university's work environment and interpersonal dynamics to provide informed responses. The sample was further stratified to reflect proportional representation from key departments and faculties.

Table 1: Distribution of the study population and selected sample across academic and non-teaching staff of the University.

Staff Category	Sample Size
Academic Staff	25
Registry Staff	35
Bursary	5
Security Personnel	5
Health Personnel	8
Technical Officers	8
Librarians	6
Departmental Administrators	5
Other Support Staff	3
Total	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of 100 respondents selected from both academic and non-teaching staff of the University. Registry Staff had the highest representation with 35 respondents (35%), followed by Academic Staff with 25 respondents (25%). Health Personnel and Technical Officers each had 8 respondents (8%), while Librarians accounted for 6 respondents (6%). Bursary, Security Personnel, and Departmental Administrators each had 5 respondents (5%), while Other Support Staff had the least with 3 respondents (3%). Overall, the sample reflects broad representation across key staff categories, ensuring balanced views and reliable findings for the study.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was designed to measure perceptions and experiences relating to effective communication, active listening,

empathy, and their effects on interpersonal relationships and organizational performance. It consisted of 30 items organized into four thematic sections which are: Demographic Information, Effective Communication Practices, Active Listening Behaviours and Empathic Interactions and Workplace Climate. Each item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). This scaling method was chosen for its ability to capture the intensity of respondents' perceptions and attitudes across a continuum, thereby allowing for nuanced statistical analysis.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by professionals in education, organizational behaviour, and psychology. Feedback from these experts was incorporated to refine the language, structure, and relevance of the items. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.87. This high level of internal consistency indicates that the instrument reliably measures the intended constructs. According to Nunnally (1978), a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.70 is considered acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate a high level of reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a hybrid approach to ensure broad participation and accommodate staff preferences and schedules. Questionnaires were administered in two formats: Physically (hard copies): Distributed in staff offices and departmental lounges across faculties and administrative units. Online (digital copies): Shared via institutional email and secure survey links to enable remote participation. Respondents were given a two-week window to complete and return the questionnaires. Reminders were sent at regular intervals to ensure a high response rate. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the structured questionnaires were analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 26). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to provide a general overview of the distribution of responses regarding the key variables; effective communication, active listening, and empathy. This initial analysis offered insight into prevailing patterns and perceptions of interpersonal relationships among academic and non-teaching staff.

To test the relationships among the variables and examine their influence on organizational performance, inferential statistics were utilized. Specifically, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was applied to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationships between the independent variables (effective communication, active listening, and empathy) and the dependent variable (interpersonal relationship quality and organizational effectiveness). This analysis helped reveal whether higher levels of communication competence, listening behaviour, and empathetic interactions were significantly associated with improved workplace relationships and institutional cohesion.

Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the combined and individual predictive contributions of the independent variables to the dependent variable. This technique enabled the researcher to evaluate the extent to which each variable; communication, listening, and empathy significantly influenced overall organizational performance. The regression model produced key indicators such as the coefficient of determination (R²), adjusted R², F-statistics, beta weights, and p-values to determine the model's fit and the statistical significance of each predictor.

Overall, the use of SPSS Version 26 provided a robust and reliable platform for analyzing the dataset, ensuring accurate interpretation of the relationships and predictive dynamics among the study variables in the context of a higher educational institution.

Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Interpersonal Relationship Indicators among Staff of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Effective Communication	4.25	0.72
Active Listening	4.10	0.81
Empathy	4.18	0.76
Teamwork	4.33	0.70

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for four key interpersonal relationship indicators evaluated among academic and non-teaching staff members of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo. The variables measured include Effective Communication, Active Listening, Empathy, and Teamwork. Each variable was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores denote stronger agreement or a more positive perception of the construct in question. Effective Communication has a mean score of 4.25 and a standard deviation of 0.72. This indicates that most staff members perceive communication within the institution as being highly effective. The moderate variation suggests that while experiences may differ slightly, the general perception is strongly favorable. Active Listening scored a mean of 4.10 with a higher standard deviation of 0.81, reflecting a good level of attentive and responsive listening among staff, but with more noticeable differences in perception across the respondents. This may point to differences in communication styles or listening habits among departments or individuals. Empathy, with a mean of 4.18 and a standard deviation of 0.76, shows that many staff members feel that empathy understanding and responding to the emotions and needs of others is present and valued in their interpersonal interactions. The moderate spread in responses suggests room for growth in ensuring that this trait is uniformly experienced.

Teamwork emerged with the highest mean score of 4.33 and the lowest standard deviation of 0.70. This signifies a strong and consistent sense of collaboration and cooperation among staff members, suggesting that the institution benefits from a well-integrated and mutually supportive workforce. Overall, the descriptive results show that the staff at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, generally experience high-quality interpersonal relationships in their work environment. The mean scores for all variables are above 4.0, indicating positive

perceptions. However, the relatively higher variability in *Active Listening* suggests a potential area for improvement. Emphasizing communication training and promoting empathetic engagement could further enhance interpersonal dynamics and foster a more inclusive and productive institutional culture.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix Showing Relationships among Interpersonal Relationship Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Communication	1			
2. Active Listening	.68**	1		
3. Empathy	.65**	.72**	1	
4. Teamwork	.71**	.67**	.75**	1

**p < 0.01

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among four key interpersonal relationship variables: Communication, Active Listening, Empathy, and Teamwork. The correlation values indicate the strength and direction of the linear relationships between each pair of variables, with all results being statistically significant at the 0.01 level (p < 0.01). This means that the relationships are not due to chance and reflect true associations among the variables in the study population. There is a strong positive correlation (r = .68) between Communication and Active Listening, suggesting that staff members who communicate effectively are also more likely to engage in attentive and responsive listening. Similarly, Communication is positively correlated with Empathy (r = .65), indicating that individuals who are skilled communicators also tend to be more empathetic in their interactions. The strongest relationship involving Communication is with Teamwork (r = .71), which implies that effective communication greatly contributes to building strong collaborative efforts among staff. Active Listening is also strongly correlated with Empathy (r = .72), revealing that individuals who actively listen are more likely to understand and respond to the emotions and perspectives of others. Furthermore, the correlation between Active Listening and Teamwork (r = .67) suggests that listening attentively helps to foster mutual cooperation and group harmony. The highest correlation observed in the matrix is between Empathy and Teamwork (r = .75), indicating that empathy plays a crucial role in supporting collaboration, mutual respect, and effective team functioning. In summary, the findings show that all the interpersonal relationship variables are significantly and positively related to each other. This underscores the interconnected nature of these traits and highlights the importance of developing strong communication, listening, and empathy skills to enhance teamwork and overall organizational effectiveness.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Influence of Interpersonal Relationship Variables on Teamwork

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Effective Communication	0.38	4.91	0.000**
Active Listening	0.29	3.55	0.001**
Empathy	0.42	5.12	0.000**

**p < 0.01

Table 4 displays the results of a multiple regression analysis conducted to determine the extent to which Effective Communication, Active Listening, and Empathy predict Teamwork

among staff members. The analysis reveals that all three predictors significantly contribute to explaining variations in teamwork, with p-values less than 0.01, indicating high statistical significance. Empathy emerged as the strongest predictor of teamwork with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of 0.42, a t-value of 5.12, and a p-value of 0.000, suggesting that staff members who are more empathetic are more likely to foster and maintain effective team collaboration. This means that the ability to understand and share the feelings of others has the greatest influence on enhancing teamwork. Effective Communication also significantly predicts teamwork ($\beta = 0.38$; $t = 4.91$; $p = 0.000$), indicating that staff who communicate clearly and effectively contribute positively to teamwork dynamics. This supports the idea that clear information exchange and open dialogue are essential for collective success. Active Listening shows a moderate yet statistically significant contribution to teamwork ($\beta = 0.29$; $t = 3.55$; $p = 0.001$), demonstrating that attentively hearing and processing others' inputs plays a key role in team cohesion and performance. In summary, the regression analysis confirms that Empathy, Effective Communication, and Active Listening all significantly predict teamwork. Among these, empathy is the most influential factor, followed closely by effective communication. This implies that efforts to strengthen these interpersonal skills can greatly enhance collaborative work culture and improve institutional effectiveness.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study reveal a significant and strong positive correlation between interpersonal skills and teamwork among staff members at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo. Specifically, effective communication shows a correlation coefficient of $r = .71$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating that clear, respectful, and consistent communication enhances collaborative efforts among team members. Similarly, active listening has a correlation of $r = .67$ ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that attentiveness and the willingness to genuinely hear others' perspectives contribute meaningfully to team cohesion. Empathy demonstrates the strongest correlation with teamwork ($r = .75$, $p < 0.01$), emphasizing that understanding and compassion significantly reinforce mutual support and cooperation within teams.

The multiple regression analysis further strengthens these findings by showing the relative contributions of each interpersonal skill to teamwork. Empathy emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$) of effective teamwork, implying that when staff members exhibit high levels of emotional understanding and sensitivity, the quality of teamwork improves substantially. Effective communication also plays a critical role ($\beta = 0.38$), highlighting that the ability to exchange information clearly and constructively is essential for collective performance. Active listening, while slightly less influential ($\beta = 0.29$), still has a statistically significant impact, showing that being fully present in conversations supports team collaboration.

Together, these outcomes affirm the vital importance of interpersonal relationships in promoting team cohesion, enhancing productivity, and supporting the achievement of organizational objectives. They align with existing literature that emphasizes soft skills as foundational to healthy and high-performing workplace environments, especially within academic institutions where collaboration across diverse units is essential.

Conclusion

This study concludes that positive interpersonal relationships anchored in effective communication, active listening, and empathy are essential for building strong, collaborative teams. At Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, these interpersonal competencies significantly contribute to a productive and harmonious work environment. Strengthening these skills among staff not only enhances teamwork but also drives the university closer to realizing its institutional goals. Investing in the emotional and relational capacities of employees is therefore not optional, but a strategic necessity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable strategies are recommended to enhance interpersonal dynamics and strengthen teamwork within Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo. Firstly, the university should introduce mandatory interpersonal skills training sessions every six months. These workshops should focus on key areas such as communication, active listening, empathy, and teamwork, and be made accessible to all staff to reinforce these essential interpersonal competencies regularly. Secondly, it is advisable to equip administrative and academic leaders with emotional intelligence coaching. By providing targeted coaching programmes, leaders at all levels can develop and model emotionally intelligent behaviours, thereby fostering a more supportive and effective work culture across departments. Thirdly, the university should digitize internal communication channels to foster transparency and accountability. The adoption of user-friendly digital platforms for internal communication can help streamline information sharing, minimize misunderstandings, and promote a more open and transparent work environment.

Another important step is to initiate mentorship programmes that model empathy and listening skills. By pairing experienced staff with junior or new colleagues in structured mentorship arrangements, the institution can nurture a culture of empathy, learning, and interpersonal growth. Finally, it is crucial to conduct quarterly feedback surveys to identify interpersonal challenges early. Regular assessments of staff experiences with communication, listening, and teamwork will enable the university to identify emerging interpersonal issues and address them proactively before they escalate.

By implementing these strategies, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, can cultivate a more emotionally intelligent, communicative, and collaborative workforce, ultimately contributing to the institution's long-term effectiveness and success.

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