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Impact of Downsizing on Employee Commitment: A Case Study of Surface and Mashwede Refinery

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Abstract:
The research sought to assess the impact of downsizing on employee commitment in selected cooking oil manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe. The research was carried out in the form of a case study in which a sample of 98 employees from a population of 108 employees was used. Stratified random sampling procedure was employed in selecting elements from 8 top management, 20 middle managers and 80 general workers. A combination of questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from the sample. Basing on the findings from Mashwede Refinery and Surface Investments the study revealed that downsizing had negatively impacted on employee commitment as evidenced by decrease in productivity, disciplinary hearing increase and decrease in employee morale. The research also found that the task of managing survivors syndrome and employee commitment would not be difficult if the leadership recognized that survivors have special needs, provides the emotional support they deserve to ensure continuous and honest communication. In light of these findings the study recommends that for any change strategy to produce desired results companies should embark on job counselling, climate survey to check morale and provide frequent and transparent communication before, during and even after downsizing in order to retain employee commitment.

Keywords*: change management, commitment, downsizing, productivity, restructuring*

1. Introduction

The concept of downsizing is not new, it has generated a lot of studies and global attention from academics, consultancies, organisations and authors focusing on the impact of downsizing on employee commitment in organizations.Due to 2008-2009 dollarizations in Zimbabwe, global recession and layoffs, aggregate demands and supply for products were greatly affected (Moyo,2010).Confronted with this harsh reality, organizations reduce their production and number of workforce in a bid to gain a competitive edge, cut costs and improve productivity and efficiency. Thus to gain a competitive edge, organizations are left with no option but rather to downsize. The Zimbabwean cooking oil manufacturing sector has gone through a phase of economic hardship, ranging from, market deregulation, business reengineering, rapid development of information technology and global competition. As a result much greater emphasis has been placed on flexibility and efficiency of the company and downsizing has been one favored strategy to achieve these goals. However, the reality is that downsizing have resulted in tremendous fallout in all areas of the productivity including low employee morale, high level of absenteeism, distrust and turnover among most of the employees.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

This research is guided by Alicia et al’s (1999) downsizing and organizational commitment model and Walton’s (1985) commitment model.

2.1. Alicia et al's (1999) downsizing and organizational commitment model

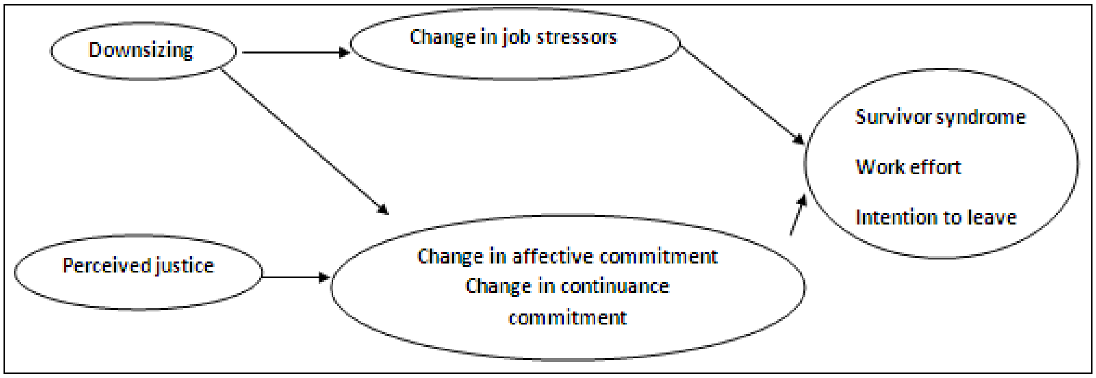

Figure 1
Source Alicia et al: 1999

The downsizing and organizational commitment model developed by Alicia et al (1999) aids understanding of the psychological effects of the downsizing process on the individual's well-being and commitment. The model shows the effect of downsizing on changes in employee commitment, changes in job stressors, and perceptions of job security. These variables together with perceived justice are correlated with survivor syndrome, work effort and intention to leave.

2.2. Walton model (1985)

Walton (1985) underscored the importance of commitment and highlighted that organizational performance is enhanced if an organizations abandon tight control systems but rather establishing order in the system. Once order in the system is there, employee commitment is enhanced and employees endeavor to willingly go an extra mile (Walton, 1985). Walton (1985) also believed that eliciting commitment involved giving employees increased discretion over their working life and recognition of employees, as stakeholder in the organization would lead to increased levels of performance. In support the Japanese school of excellence, backed by Ouchi (1981) believed that the secret behind the success of the Japanese from the 1970s was premised on the performance of a highly committed workforce. They believed that the best way to motivate employees is to get their full commitment to the values of the organization by leadership and involvement.

2.3. Downsizing

Downsizing is a planned elimination of positions or jobs whose primary purpose is to reduce the workforce (Cascio, 2000). Organizational downsizing as a change management strategy has been adopted for more than two decades (Gandolfi, 2007). In the 1980s and early 1990s, it was implemented primarily by firms experiencing difficult economic times (Gandolfi, 2006).

2.4. Commitment

Employee commitment is the psychological feeling that binds an individual to the organization (McKena ,2000).Dunham et al (1994) supported review of organizational commitment literature by Meyer and Allen (1991), and, found three types of commitment that is affective, continuance and normative.

2.5. Downsizing and commitment

Organizational downsizing has the potential to produce a stressful encounter for survivors (Tang and Ibrahim, 1998). Survivors may view downsizing as an irrevocable loss in terms of their valued co-workers. They may also experience a workload increase since fewer people are available to do the same amount of work (Tang and Ibrahim, 1998). Moreover, organizational downsizing involves the perception of uncertainty within the organizational context (Hui and Lee, 2000). For example, organizational downsizing may be viewed as a source of anticipated harm, since survivors will be afraid of losing their jobs in the future (Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). These downsizing-induced stresses can lead to a reduction in employees' affective commitment to the organization (Brockner, 1988b). In addition to the direct impact of downsizing on employees' affective commitment to the organization, downsizing might affect employees' affective commitment to the organization indirectly through employees' daily work experiences. Cameron (1994) argues that downsizing wittingly or unwittingly has an impact on work processes, that is, it affects what work gets done and how it gets done, because fewer employees are available to do the same amount of work.

Jick (1985) propounds that survivors are considerably more stressed when there is severe downsizing than when there is only mild downsizing. Brockneret et al's (1988) research confirms that surviving employees have much less affective commitment to the organization in the face of severe rather than mild downsizing. Thus, the more severe the organizational downsizing, the lower employees' affective commitment to the organization is likely to be. Brockneret et al (1992) observe that survivors experience increased work overload as a result of downsizing, but also greater autonomy and more variety and that their jobs became more intrinsically enjoyable. Given the fact that employees' work experiences strongly and consistently appear to be the antecedents of employees' affective commitment to the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1997), if downsizing affects the nature of work, the change of work nature resulted from downsizing will affect employees' affective commitment to the organization through reduced employee morale.

Some support for these statements is provided by Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1993) study, which showed that change in the perceived intrinsic quality of the content of survivors' jobs (in terms of autonomy, task identity, task variety, task significant, and feedback from the job itself) relative to the situation before downsizing is correlated with change in survivors attitudes (as expressed in affective commitment and turnover intention). Thus, alongside the impact of downsizing per se on employees' affective commitment, downsizing may affect employees' affective commitment to the organization indirectly through the change of employees' daily work experiences caused by downsizing. Despite the importance of these issues in the downsizing context, they have not yet been the subject of systematic empirical research. It is to these considerations that our present research is addressed. This research examines the mechanisms through which downsizing exerts its influence on employees' commitment to the organization.

Meyer and Allen (1997) state that as organizations downsize their workforce rely more than ever on survivors to do what is needed for the organization to survive and succeed.Dunfordet et al (1998) propound that downsizing leads to an increase in work pressure because of a number of interrelated factors. These include coping with the demands of increased spans of control, taking on the added tasks and responsibilities of those who have left, and those brought about by the devolution of tasks previously performed by specialist staff. Thus, survivors are required to be more flexible, adaptable and to find creative ways of improving their efficiency. Moreover, in cases where the workforce has been slimmed down, absenteeism and tardiness result in grave problems, and turnover (particularly of top performers) can have serious consequences (Meyer and Allen, 1997).These points underline the importance of employees' affective commitment to the organization.Kenneth et al (2003) argue that employees can be traumatized by layoffs, their own or those of co-workers. Kenneth et al (2003) also state that loss of work can have a devastating impact on people's lives and can also damage, if not destroy, the relationship an organization has with the people who remain.

Research by Sommer (1999) reported that survivors become self-absorbed, narrow-minded, risk-averse and an attitude of me-first becomes dominant after downsizing. He further states that survivors' morale and trust in management are also eroded. Henkoff (1994) further states that although survivors are the very people who are supposed to revitalize the organization and delight customers ,they tend to invest little in the organization, behave like independent contractors and are no longer committed to the general welfare of the company as a whole. Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1993) postulates that indeed downsizing produces considerable dysfunctional consequences including the decline of service quality, innovation and employees' survivor syndrome as expressed in increasing anxiety and risk aversion. However, Dunfordet et al's (1998) research of 653 Australian organizations share different sentiments with the argument of Brockner and Wiesenfeld, (1993) and revealed that a third of the organizations achieved improved labor productivity, half managed to reduce labor costs and less than a fifth improved labor flexibility through downsizing.Dopson and Stewart's (1993) study report concurs with Dunfordet al.'s (1998) research findings and revealed that delayering enable middle managers to have clearer areas of responsibility, more control over resources, freedom to innovate and freedom to take on new challenges.

A survey of 1147 hospitals by Burda (1993) in United States of America revealed that 27% of the institutions surveyed were decreasing the size of their staff and 66% reported staff cuts .The survey revealed that the majority of the hospital faces a challenge of employee commitment once downsizing started. This concurs with the findings of Henkoff (1994) and Cascio (1993) who revealed that, at least one third of large and medium-size US companies have downsized their workforces every year since1988, and more than 85 percent of Fortune 1,000 firms pared their white-collar workforce between 1987 and 1991.However, by no means the majority of companies studied encountered downsizing effects of affected employee commitment through absenteeism, affected productivity and reduced employee morale.

A study by Jane et al (2001) also revealed that during the recession period in 1999 Continental Airlines (a major US airline) shifted its competitive strategy and embarked on a restructuring exercise through downsizing with the aim of cutting costs and remain competitive mainly from Delta airlines. The study found that the restructuring through downsizing resulted in lay-offs of the staff which performed non-core activities and essential staff remained but still the company suffered a heavy blow of losses due to affected employee commitment. The study further revealed that soon after the downsizing the service became poor and consequently a reduction in customers. Sharing the same sentiments, an extant study by Zingales (1999) investigated the effects of downsizing after outsourcing some non-core activities on the survivors of downsizing, particularly those near the retirement age. The study hypothesizes that as most companies downsize the major targets of lay off are those due for retirement. Sixty percent (60%) of the members interviewed confirmed they were no longer willing to work and they were opting for early retirement at 55 years of age.

Another study of 3093 companies conducted by NAV based on data from the second quarter of 2000 to the fourth quarter of 2004 taken from a selection of Norwegian data registers looks at the effects of staff changes, both reductions and increases, on the level of employee commitment. The findings revealed that in the first group of companies with substantial downsizing, absenteeism increased among the employees with stable employment. In the second group of companies with increasing staff numbers, the sickness absenteeism rate was also found to rise among those in stable employment. In the third group of companies with small or moderate staff changes, no significant relation between the changes and absenteeism was found. The study concludes that downsizing had the strongest effect on absenteeism rates which in turn affects employee commitment among younger men and older women.

The Greenglass study by Kinnunen et al. (2000) concurs with the findings of NAV. The Greenglass study consisted of 1,363 nurses employed in hospitals that were undergoing extensive downsizing, first they filled out a self-report anonymous questionnaire. Results of this study demonstrated that the impact of hospital downsizing had a direct effect on job satisfaction, which in turn then had a negative impact on absenteeism and on job security. In addition, the study found that the more the nurses believed hospital downsizing had lowered the quality of health care and had a negative impact on working conditions, the less likely they were to experience job satisfaction and the more apt to report feelings of job insecurity. Findings further demonstrated that job satisfaction functioned as an intermediary between the impact of downsizing and job insecurity. The lower the job satisfactions, resulting from downsizing the more likely the nurses were to miss work due to affected commitment.

Out of 41 studies in the review by Quinlan et al (2001), 36 reported negative associations of downsizing with some health outcome notably sickness absence which in turn affect productivity. In contrast a fairly large general population study by Westerlund et al (2004) in Sweden finds no increase in long term sickness absence associated with large downsizing (>18% reduction in work force), while there is a small increase (OR=1.07) associated with moderate (8%-18%) downsizing. Also a smaller population study of the Stockholm area by Theorellet et al (2003) found downsizing to be associated with lower sickness absence in women, while a zero association was found for men. Two other large studies by Roed and Fevang (2007) find evidence of downsizing effects. The estimated downsizing effects are somewhat larger in Vahtera et al.'s (2003) study of Finnish municipal employees, with major downsizing (18% or more) being associated with about 22% increase in the frequency of absence spells among permanent employees.

Kyler (1998)'s study to examine the mechanisms through which downsizing affects employees' commitment through morale in two Korean banks used a total of 436 questionnaires completed by bank employees. The findings showed that the more severe the extent of downsizing the more the impact employees complained daily of their work experiences, increased workloads dissatisfaction and unnecessary pressure from unsecure superiors.This is supported by Frazee (1997) who found that of the 1 441 Human Resources managers from companies that cut jobs between 1990 and July 1996, 72 percent reported an immediate and negative impact on employee commitment through reduced employee morale

The researcher observed that, the above studies on downsizing and employee commitment concentrated only on developed nation namely United States of America and Australian companies none was conducted in Africa. It was also observed that most related empirical studies focused on stable economical environment. However from the empirical evidence above it is evident that not much has been done on accounting for employee commitment during and after downsizing in developing countries like Zimbabwe where the economy is slowly stabilising from a slump. This research therefore serves to unfold the impact of downsizing on employee commitment in the cooking oil manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe which is a developing country.

3. Research Methodology

The researchers employed a case study approach in order to collect data. The approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to concentrate on a real scenario, thus proffering solutions to any business that may want to use the stated findings for improving a real situation. The case study also allowed the researchers to give their own judgments and opinions on since they were actually interacting with the participants under study. Permission to carry out the research at Surface Investments and Mashwede Refinery was granted by the station's human resources manager. This permission which was in written form was used as the researcher's introduction to approach the sampled respondents for data. Appointments with respondents were made by letters and through the telephone where applicable. The researcher hand delivered and collected the questionnaires from the sample elements on the same day. Im-prompt interviews were also used where and when necessary. These interviews afforded the researchers the privilege to read facial expressions of respondents and their body language.

3.1. Study Site

The case study was conducted at Chitungwiza Surface Investments and Mashwede Refinery in Zimbabwe. The companies was chosen because it was a convenient study site since one of the researchers was employed at the organization during the study and therefore access to vital information was easy.

3.2. Sampling Method

Using stratified random sampling, the researcher divided the employees into two segments, that is, for management and for general workers. The researchers used 75 per cent of management and 45 per cent of middle managers and 79 per cent of shop floor workers. The researchers used these percentages due to the size of segments and the fact that they are both above the recommended 10 per cent of their respective populations (Best and Khan: 2003). The sample consisted of 108 participants who were drawn equally from the selected departments. The researcher selected five departments to represent the population namely, Human Resources, Production, Engineering, Marketing and Procurement. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan sample determination method. The sample size was subdivided into:

- 8 Top management
- 20 Middle managers
- 80 Shop floor workers

Top Management	7	4	4
Middle Management	12	11	10
General Employees	45	41	36
Total	64	56	50

Table 1: Usable sample at Mashwede Refinery
Source: Primary data

Top Management	4	4	3
Middle Management	16	9	6
General Employees	40	39	39
Total	60	52	48

Table 2: Usable sample at Surface Investments
Source: Primary data

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

The questionnaire (self-administered) was the major instrument used for data collection because it is regarded as the most widely used technique for collecting primary data on respondents' attitudes, opinions, perceptions and demographic characteristics (Moorhead and Griffin:1985; Leedy:1993). Questionnaires are also a feasible and objective way to reach out to a large number of respondents. Moreover, they are inexpensive to administer when collecting first-hand information. In addition, the use of questionnaires provides a faster and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of quantifiable data from a larger population. Data from questionnaires, especially those with closed questions, are also easy to quantify, analyze and generalize from. These questionnaires also reduced the rate of biasness in the research in that the respondents maintained anonymity when responding and were encouraged openness when responding to sensitive questions. To test the reliability of questionnaires, a pilot study was carried out in which ten questionnaires were distributed to Surface and Mashwede employees. These respondents were not part of the target group for the study. The pilot study allowed the researcher to determine the adequacy of the whole questionnaire to respondents. Finally, this allowed the researcher to come up with well-refined questions that were relevant to the research.

3.4. Data entry and analysis

Data gathered through the questionnaire was graphically, tabulated and synthesized to give meaning. Analysis of the data was done immediately below each presentation.

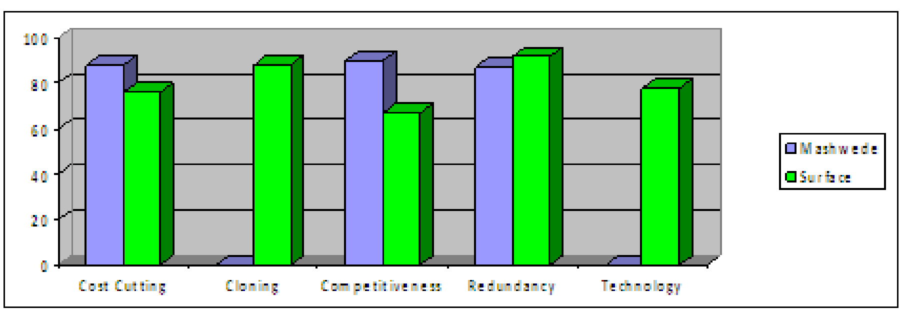

Figure 2: Reasons for downsizing at Surface Investments and Mashwede Refinery
Source: Primary data

The majority of employees at both companies revealed that cost cutting, desire to remain competitive, redundancy and cloning are the reasons why companies downsize. Sharing the same sentiments is a survey carried out by Wyatt Associates in which 1,005 firms that had downsized between 1986 and 1991 in a bid to reduce costs, the results indicated that 46 percent of the firms had reduced expenses, 32 percent had increased profits, 22 percent had experienced gains in productivity, and 17 percent had reduced bureaucracy (Cameron, 1994a).In support, Farrell and Mavondo (2004) argues that the main motive behind rightsizing efforts is the desire for an immediate reduction of costs and increased level of efficiency, productivity, profitability and competitiveness.Cascio et al (1997) also

support this line of thinking by stating that firms that downsize are able to lower their labor costs, reducing redundancy and as a result they are able to control product prices to improve competitiveness.
On the contrary, Mirvis' (1997) results from a survey are inconsistent with the findings from Surface Investments and Mashwede. His survey found that over one third of the downsizing companies reported an unexpected increase in temporary workers, the use of consultants and overtime. This means that costs increased due to overtime pay, payment of additional temporary workers and consultant work. Similarly, de Vries and Balazs (1997) claim that when long-term employees were cut, organizations experienced loss of institutional memory and that when head office employees who had a more long term strategic mindset were dismissed, often new executives adopted a short-term approach to decision making. This resulted in an overall sense of alienation for the firm and gave rise to serious and negative consequences for the research and development department, capital investments, training and development costs, and over-all performance of these organizations.

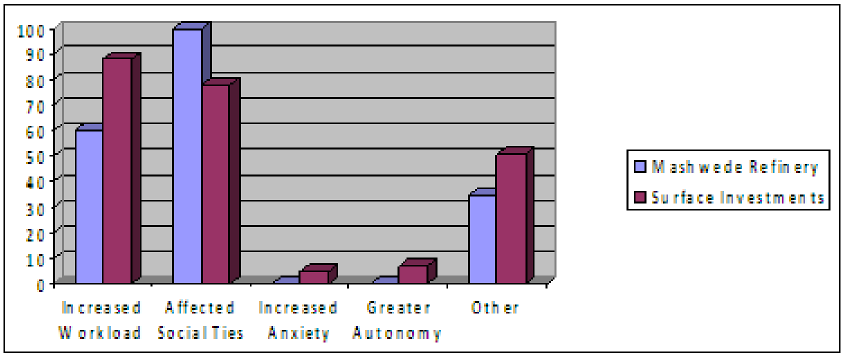

Figure 3: Effects of downsizing on employee commitment.
Source: Primary data

88% of Surface Investments respondents highlighted that increased workloads affected their commitment to the organization after downsizing. The findings cement claim of Dunfordet et al (1998) who postulates that downsizing leads to an increase in work pressure because of a number of interrelated factors. On the other hand 99% of Mashwede Refinery respondents cited affected social ties as the major factor which negatively affects their commitment during and after downsizing. These results are consistent with results from Kenneth et al (2003) who state that employees can be traumatized by layoffs, their own or those of co-workers.
1% of Mashwede respondents against 4% of Surface respondents argue that increased anxiety due to downsizing negatively affect their commitment to their organisation.7% of Surface respondents cited greater autonomy brought about by downsizing positively affect employee commitment. Their claims concurs with Brockneret al (1992) who observe that survivors experience increased work overload as a result of downsizing, but also greater autonomy and more variety and that their jobs became more intrinsically enjoyable.

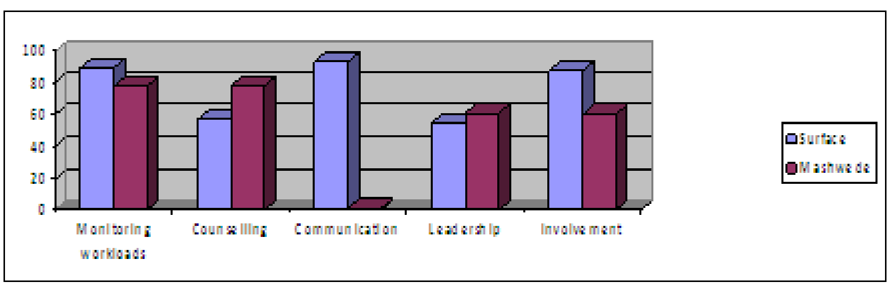

Figure 4: Strategies to enhance employee commitment during downsizing
Source: Primary data

93% of Surface respondents against 1% of Mashwede respondents highlighted that communication enhances employee commitment during and after downsizing.Similarly, Marks et al (2003) postulate that managers should be sensitive to the rumours spread among employees.78% of Mashwede respondents indicated job counselling as the major strategy that enhances employee commitment during and after downsizing and their view concurs with Roloff's (2007) who states that to enhance employee commitment during and after downsizing, managers must have conversations with employees about their new roles subsequent to the downsizing and support them as much as possible in developing,acquiring,learning the knowledge, skills and tools necessary to be effective in that new role. 89% and 87% of Surface respondents cited monitoring workloads and employee involvement respectively as the other strategies that enhance employee commitment. The above concurs with the findings of Roloff (2007) who states that employees want leaders who are credible and tell the truth during and after downsizing. On the other hand only 60% of Mashwede respondents indicated employee involvement as factor that enhances employee commitment during and after downsizing.

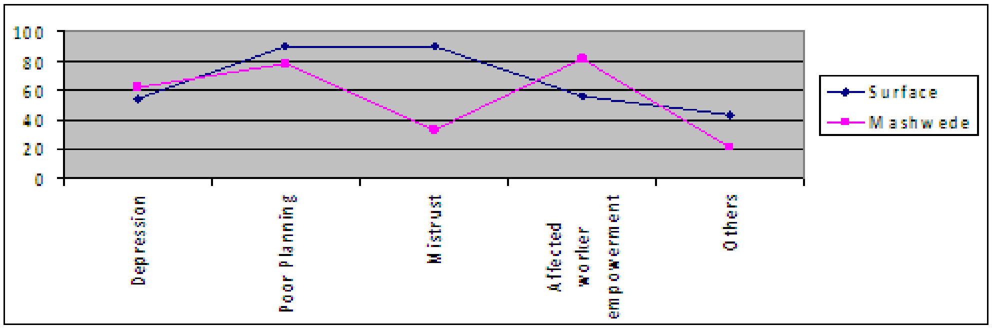

Figure 5: Challenges faced during downsizing
Source: Primary data

Fig 5 shows that 90% of Surface Investments respondents revealed that mistrust is the major challenge faced during and after downsizing. This concurs with the research carried by American Management Association (2002) on one poll of 1,142 companies which revealed that nearly half of downsizing was badly or not well prepared for the dismantling, depression and sense of permanent change were kinds of problems that developed subsequently.81% of Mashwede respondents highlighted affected employee empowerment as the major challenge they faced during and after downsizing. Poor planning was highlighted by 90% of Surface respondents and 78% of Mashwederespondents.43% of surface respondents and 21% of Mashwede respondents revealed that other challenges ranging from communication problems reduced employee productivity and affected employee morale. Similar results were obtained by Taylor (1996) who found that unplanned downsizing causes emotions within a company that range from bitterness to relief to paranoia. Taylor's (1996) study also indicates that survivor guilt, depression, poor planning, low morale and fatigue are consequences of doing more with less.

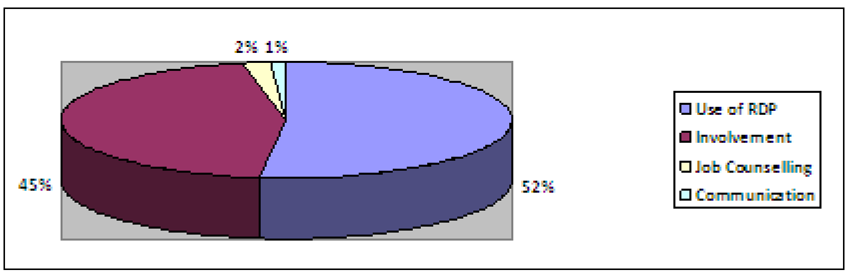

Figure 6: Mitigating the negative effects of downsizing
Source: Primary data

Fig 6 shows that 52% of respondents from both companies show that the use of RDP is the best way to mitigate challenges encountered during and after downsizing exercise. These views are supported by Appellbaum and Donia (2001) who postulate that realistic downsizing preview reduces the challenges of downsizing as it focuses on strategic issues that is issues which affect all employees, concerns of terminated employees and surviving employees. Appellbaum and Donia (2001) further state that realist downsizing preview (RDP) enables managers to be well trained and become empathetic such that they will be able to assist employees to adjust to the new organizational culture and contribute to higher productivity and morale.45% of respondents from both companies revealed that employee involvement from the initial stages up to the end can also counter the negative effects of downsizing. Only 2% cited job counselling as the strategy to mitigate the negative effects of downsizing.1% of the respondents highlighted proper planning and effective communication as the other ways to reduce the effects of downsizing. The above sentiments are consistent with Tzafrir et al's (2006) view that Job counseling and training programmes reduces the challenges of downsizing since survivor may enhance the utilization of human resources, decrease perceptions about breaches of psychological contract and minimize internal strains and organizational conflicts. Cameron (2004) also supports the above sentiments by stating that good communication is the glue that binds an organization together. It prepares and helps employees change and buy into the new business reality with trust, loyalty and enthusiasm.

4. Conclusion

This study, as well as others examining the impact of corporate transformation and downsizing on survivors, contradicts the common–sense assumptions that survivors of this process would be relieved, flattered and motivated. Evidently, downsizing is a complex and challenging process for an organization to undertake. It is a process that should not be taken lightly but should be clearly thought through by the leadership of the organization and the rationale for change must be clearly understood by all participants. The task of managing survivors would not be difficult if the leadership recognizes that survivors have special needs, provides the emotional support they deserve and ensure continuous and honest communication.

5. Acknowledgements
The researchers would like to acknowledge the patience and dedication of the selected managers and general workers of Surface Investments and Mashwede Refinery who participated in this research. Special thanks also go to the management of the above two companies who allowed the case study to be undertaken in their organizations. Without their permission, this research would not be a success.

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