



Culture and Behaviour at Workplace

By Mwangi Wanjumbi

Any day hardly passes without an employee of a company appearing in the newspapers unfortunately for unpleasant reasons. Some of them depict information such as “so and so whose photo appears herein is no longer in our employment as from such and such a date. No transactions entered with the said person will be honoured after that day.” Others involve reports to the effect that “so and so is being sought by the police for fraud. Anybody with information on the whereabouts of the said person should report to the nearest police station.” Sometimes, a cash prize is attached to the announcement. This is a sad situation and in particular an indicator of the extent to which morality or integrity has decayed even in the workplace.

Can this situation be reversed? The answer is yes but only if right measures are put in place to change peoples’ attitudes and behaviours through training. But, the attitude and approach of employers towards training and development of staff should be revisited. Some organizations do not comprehend why they need to spend resources training their junior staff. They believe that once supervisors and above are trained; the knowledge can be cascaded downwards. And this is a common scenario in many organizations.

Apparently, capacity building of staff should never be a preserve of senior staff, even though these seniors may need more skills, therefore much more training and development interventions. In addition, training is not just for developing skills. It also helps in changing people’s attitudes, behaviours and cultures thus building their capacity to perform better.

Incidentally, there are many institutions with two categories of staff. Those that are the unionisable thus employed under the union terms and those belonging to the management. The former in some institutions appears to have their terms of service prescribed by what is commonly referred to as the common bargaining agreement (CBA). It is a document arrived at after negotiations between management and union representatives or sometimes decided upon by the Industrial Court when the parties cannot agree. Unfortunately, the document hardly covers training or capacity building of the unionisable staff.

In the meantime, we are all born into one culture or the other. This means that we become what we learn from the environment and people (or animals) around us. One major attribute of the people born today and in the recent years especially in the urban centres is that, the culture into which they are born

rarely embraces development of moral values. Such values include trust, respect for the person in others, their property and so on. This is a sad scenario because we are all influenced by the environment around us.

In fact, if a Luo child is born in Masai land for example and is not influenced by the parents, he will tend to adopt the culture of the Maasai. The same applies to a Maasai child born in Luoland. Did we not recently see a girl who adopted monkey habits having lived with them in Lake Nakuru National Park? Even two years rehabilitation has only yielded little change to the now seven year old. But how does culture affect our behaviors?

Perhaps we need to compare the urbanites with the rural folk. Those born in rural areas where cultural values and norms are still predominant and widely observed could be lucky. Even mode of greetings is so elaborate depending on the parties involved. In most cultures, for example, there are greetings meant for mother and son; mother and daughter; daughter and father and so on.

And these greetings are replicated to the age-mates of the respective parties, practices which would look outdated if not dismissed as primitive in Nairobi for example.

The urbanites on the other hand are today born into a culture where the society has no time for social values. Parents are too busy at work or in their businesses to get time to nurture the moral growth of their children. They instead leave this heavy responsibility to house-girls and the school system.

These greetings incidentally inculcate the value of respect for one another. The practices by the rural folk have thus ensured that at least some moral values continue to be observed.

The urbanites on the other hand are today born into a culture where the society has no time for social values. Parents are too busy at work or in their businesses to get time to nurture the moral growth of their children. They instead leave this heavy responsibility to house-girls and the school system. The Christian church embraced by 80% of the population, on the other hand has only moderate contact with children as they grow up. This happens probably only on Sundays, thus, 52 days out of 365 in a year if at all and only for a few hours. Eventually, these children with no values mature into adults who end up forming the workforce in the employment sector.

These employees or better still ex-employees are now the subject of constant negative advertisements in the newspapers. Are these not liabilities associated with poor moral growth that spill over to the employment sector? Indeed they are. And the situation is further complicated by the adopted Kenyan culture of get rich quick.

Perhaps, these incidences could be reduced if all employers embrace the idea of continually training all their staff at whatever level. They should be developed and empowered and made to have some sense of belongingness to the organization. But unfortunately the junior ones have been sidelined in most organizations. They end up reporting to work just because they have to earn a living.

They end up never appreciating the objectives, values, missions and visions of an organization. Their contribution is continually taken for granted and they are rarely seen or see themselves as cogs that contribute to the turning of the whole wheel. They end up pulling in directions that are different from that of the senior staff.

Incidentally, one of the 14 principles of management that were developed by Henry Fayol, a pioneer management science Guru of the 19th Century is 'unity of direction'. It is unlikely that there can be unity when some people are not continually trained on what direction to pull and why. What of when they are just expected to follow orders and instructions of the seniors without ever being prepared for it?

This is probably why senior staff on the other hand, end up becoming watchdogs of their own juniors. Sometimes, their work is just to monitor the activities of these juniors at the expense of other important functions like planning and organizing. How can this sad scenario be avoided? The development of the entire workforce cannot be taken for granted any more.

Train even the juniors on motivation, business values and ethics, etiquette and others such as team-work and personal development. They should be made to understand that without them, the organization can never be complete. It is only then that they will feel appreciated within the workplace, a situation that would lead to less hopelessness and probably more commitment. In any case most employees spend at least 75% of the time that they are awake at the workplace.

The situation could be better if everybody is trained on how to play by the team rules and objectives. Will this approach not be less expensive than the existing situation in most organizations? Certainly, so much valuable resources are used in recruiting new staff and at the same time advertising the requisite dismissals. The employers could do better by trying to influence the behavior and attitudes of all the employees through training and development. The alternative is certainly more expensive and disruptive to organizational operations.

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