

# The consultant as a change agent

**RECENTLY**, I conducted a seminar whose theme was enterprise life cycle and business development strategies for a group of business people in Nairobi. Later, I had a talk with one of the seminar participants during the break. He looked well informed and I later learnt he runs a well endowed business. The business executive indicated that with the right advice, his business could perform better, a fact that I quickly agreed with.

Our talk reminded me of an old friend of mine who once told me that the aim of consultants is to take advantage of people's ignorance and make money while pretending to help them. His comments were surprising. I had regarded him as an intellectual given his background as a commerce graduate. Such words as taking advantage of people's ignorance to come from him, was indeed unfortunate. I immediately impressed upon him that he should be the last to talk about ignorance. I knew he had initiated several business ventures which had failed. I reminded him that, had he been consulting, he could have avoided the losses he had incurred.

Last year, there was a story in one of the daily papers about a young man who started a business buying and selling pairs of two shoes in 2001. Today, he runs a number of shoe shops in the city. When asked about the secret to his success, he attributed it to commitment to his business and close association with his business development consultant, who he named. I still retain a cutting of that newspaper.

I also had a recent chat with Esther Pasaris of Adopt-A-Light, while participating in an international entrepreneurship conference. I sought to know her formula for success. She replied that she has a deep passion for her business. What she did not mention is that she must be having a master strategist or consultant who helps her to turn her brilliant ideas into action.

My enquiries and observations indicate that most business people in Kenya have an insatiable thirst for business knowledge. They attend many business seminars particularly those that are sponsored but are unable to apply what they learn. They unfortunately shy away from investing in help by consultants. They choose instead to await more and more sponsored opportunities.

I recently met a businessman who had attended many seminars conducted by the Kenya Management Assistance Program (KMAP), which has since folded up. He confessed that he could neither apply the knowledge acquired and

neither did he appreciate the need to consult. The result of the training to his business is anybody's guess. Most people think consultancy is about being helped to fulfill statutory obligations like tax remittances and annual accounts preparations. Little attention is given to business development and management guidance.

I have further found out that most business people or entrepreneurs view management theories and principles taught in business seminars as meant for big businesses and not their small businesses. This is a misconception. Principles of management are the same irrespective of business size or type. The difference is only the strength of the resources available for every business and therefore the application process. The other difference is the cultural attributes of the different sizes and types of business. A major cause of business failure is the inability to apply management principles and concepts. People continue to run their business in the same manner year in, year out.

Eventually the businesses are overwhelmed by change.

I am encouraged by the fact that business people are becoming more receptive to business information. The business executive I spoke to after the business seminar, later heard me being interviewed on business issues in a local FM station. He immediately called me and we arranged an appointment. We eventually concluded a consultancy service arrangement which was and still is

mutually beneficial.

Consultancy is not about taking advantage of people's ignorance. Consultants are change managers and their role is to help clients overcome their ignorance. They understand both the past and current business trends. As a result, they are able to guide their clients appropriately. Consultants are trained to learn and adopt new ways of doing things particularly in view of the fact that business has now become a science (or is it an art) of managing change. The alternative is to employ trained staff in each facet of the business. Even then, it will still be necessary to engage experts from time to time to inject new ideas into the business. It is unlikely that a business can achieve its full potential without investing in consultants. It takes a deliberate effort to engage the right resources to be assured of continued success in business or any other sphere of life.

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