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Culture, Work Ethics and Productivity in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Productivity as conceptualized in this paper is, the volume of goods and services produced per unit of time by an individual or country. It examines productivity in Nigeria and submits that the Nigerian is hardworking and highly productive. In instances where he is not productive is because of alienation. On the other hand, the work ethics in Nigeria supports hard work and high productivity. There is no culture in Nigeria, which does not support hard work. From an examination of the various cultures in Nigeria including the two dominant religions of Christianity and Islam all condemn laziness and extol the virtues of hard work. Part of the problem of motivation and productivity is the failure to incorporate traditional management practices into contemporary and borrowed ones. It concludes on the note that, if progress will be made in the area of motivation, hard work and productivity, recourse to sociocultural, psychological and emotional factors are inevitable.

1. Introduction

Productivity is a very important one because, it is central to man's existence on earth. It has far reaching implications for the society at large. From any angle that it is viewed, a society with a higher level of productivity will almost invariably enjoy a higher quality of life than one with a lower level of productivity. It is therefore not totally surprising that, so much concern has been expressed over the productivity of the Nigerian worker. Such is this concern that, at a point in time, the government had to set up two agencies, the National Productivity Center (NPC) and the Productivity Prices and Incomes Board (PPIB) to look into ways of increasing the productivity of the Nigerian worker.

The general impression is that the productivity of the average Nigerian worker is low. For those who subscribe to this view, the perception is that the Nigerian worker is lazy, indolent, lacking in creativity, vision and also very corrupt. These negative attributes lead to lateness, absenteeism, loitering and closing before official closing hours.

Many schools of thought have emerged which have attempted to offer reasons of the perceived general low level of productivity among Nigerians. While one school of thought sees the problem of low productivity as a management problem, another school of thought believes that the Nigerian is inherently lazy and thus his productivity will remain low in spite of all efforts to motivate him to become more productive. There even exists another school of thought which believes that there is a culture in Nigeria which is inimical to productivity. It is the desire to resolve the conflicting conclusions of the contending schools of thought that gave impetus to this paper.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to critically examine the perception and overall issue of productivity, culture and work ethics for the purpose of addressing the following issues.

1. The alleged low productivity of the Nigerian worker, is it a myth or a reality?
2. Is there any work ethics in Nigeria?
3. Closely related to the above, to what extent has cultural factors been used as important variables in the efforts to motivate Nigerians towards improved productivity.?
4. What is to be done on a sustainable basis to increase the productivity of Nigerians?

Productivity could be defined as the volume of goods and services turned out per worker within a unit of time. In the same manner, we can also talk of the total volume of goods and services produced by a corporate body (either private or public), of a country within a given time as its productivity. In this paper, we shall be mainly concerned with individual productivity of the Nigerian. However, this cannot be treated in isolation because inevitably references will be made to productivity at the corporate and societal levels. The materials for this paper were obtained mainly from existing studies by industrial psychologists, industrial sociologists and other behavioural scientists who have studied productivity and some of the other variables that are being considered in this paper.

In a paper by a one time Director – General of the National Planning Commission in Nigeria he identified the causes of low productivity in the following ways:

1. Inadequate technical, professional knowledge and experience of the work being done. This problem persists because the services of employees are engaged without thorough scrutiny or due consideration to ensure that the new employee has the basic skills and competence for the position which is being offered. This brings to question the quality of education in our

institutions of higher learning. More importantly, it casts a shadow of doubt on the commitment to the practice of personnel management, especially in the areas of job placement and selection.

2. Poor attention to workers training and retraining
3. Low and inefficient technology, obsolete machinery, equipment and tools. As a result, there is frequent breakdown of machinery and equipment which were already outdated at the time of purchase. The result is that the equipment is difficult if not out rightly impossible to maintain.
4. Poor attitude and lack of commitment to work. The explanation for this is that, it is their work and not mine or our work. The absence of a sense of belonging is a product of colonial hangover where the work was seen as the Whiteman's work.
5. Poor conditions of work in some sectors of the economy
6. Poor physical and mental health conditions of the work force.
7. Non conducive work environment such as poor sanitation, excessive noise, poor lighting and ventilation.
8. Low worker morale with absence of motivation either financially or otherwise.
9. Poor management and poor staff supervision, which are often intolerant of collective bargaining.
10. Unenlightened trade unionism which resorts to strikes and other forms of work stoppages prematurely.
11. Indiscipline among workers, especially in the public sector, which manifests in absenteeism, pilfering and corruption. (See increasing productivity in Nigeria. A Publication of the National Productivity Centre, 1991).

In his contribution to the debate on productivity, Dafe Otobo posits that, it is wrong to see the Nigerian workers as lazy and unproductive. Rather, according to him, the problem of productivity is that of incompetent and ineffective management. He gave empirical evidence to support his assertion. In a study, he compared productivity in vehicle assembly plants in Nigeria and Europe. In Nigeria, he obtained his data from Peugeot and Volkswagen plants. It was found that in some instances, the workers in Nigeria assembled more cars than their counterparts in Europe. Extending the study to the quality of made in Nigeria goods, it was discovered that in some areas, the quality of goods made in Nigeria was far higher than that of goods made elsewhere even in Europe. A good example which is cited is the finding that beer, which is brewed in Nigeria is of a far higher quality than beer brewed in other parts of the world. For goods with low quality, the agency in charge of maintenance of quality control and not the Nigerian worker should be held responsible.

We have found for the purposes of this paper, the work of Femi Olugbile to be very useful. He threw more light on the issue of productivity by illustrating the disparities which exist in the different sectors of the economy. In a survey, he found that self – employed workers were highly motivated and thus their productivity was high. This was followed by the private sector employees and the least was the civil servant. He did not however offer any explanation for the disparities. But it could be inferred that the ownership factor and the profit motive accounted for the disparity.

From our study and discussion so far, it could be deducted that there is no consensus either by empirical findings or by way of general propositions on the exact position of productivity in Nigeria. We shall however, attempt to analyze the divergent positions and see if there are any basis for generalization in, subsequent parts of the paper.

This leads to work ethics in Nigeria. Is there any work ethics in Nigeria? If there is work ethics, is it a motivator towards more productivity or a deterrent from it? But first, let us grapple with conceptual clarification. By work ethics, we refer to the tradition, customs and beliefs which define and influence the attitudes and people's perception of work. Femi Olugbile quoting a Yoruba poem states as following:

Ise ni Ogun Ise
Mura si'se Ore mi
Ise laafi de ni giga

This means, that hard work is the solution to poverty
Be hardworking my friend.

Through hard work, you can become great

The above easily gives one a glimpse of the attitude of the Yoruba to work.

The Igbo (Delta extraction) have the saying:

Okuku yali kwo kwo, ka oweli kii zua umua

It is known that while the fowl is scavenging for food to feed its offsprings, it makes noise that sounds kwo kwo, which is indicative of hard work. Literarily, the above proverb translates that, if the fowl abandons hard work (kwo kwo) how can it fend for its young ones?. More deeply it means that if a man is lazy, how can he fend for his household. Another Igbo proverb states as follows, Ike Olu gwu onye, Ike nni agwuya. Translated, this means that if a man is tired of working, he will also be tired of eating.

Generally, in Nigeria, the people have a common saying:

No food for lazy man

It is also important to understand the teaching of Islam and Christianity which are the two religions to which majority of Nigerians adhere.

For the Christians, in the book of I Timothy Chapter 5 verse 8, it says that a man who cannot provide for his family has denied the faith and worse than an infidel. In some ways, the books of proverbs, chapter 26 from verses 14 to 16 condemns slothfulness vigorously and unequivocally. Indeed, encouragement to work hard, runs through the length and breadth of the Bible.

In the same vein, Islamic teaching on hard work is no less emphatic. According to Musnad Ahmed 1410, Grade sahih, it states that for a man to carry rope and gather firewood, then come to sell in the market and make himself independent such that he spends on his needs, that is better for him than asking people who might give or deprive him.

Another example of Islamic teaching on hard work comes from Sahih. Bukhari 3235, Grade Sahih when he pointed out that “David would never eat except from the earnings of his own hand’s work”. All of these point to the fact that the emphasis on hard work is without compromise. It is seen as the only means to self sufficiency and dignity.

In the same manner, the protestant ethics is a fine illustration of work ethics. The protestant ethics emphasizes hard work for its own sake and not for the pursuit of any worldly gain. In the light of the above, is there any basis of generalization that there exist traditions and customs which cut across Nigeria that constitutes work ethics?. The answer is yes, but with some reservations. This is because, in all Nigerian societies, varying degrees of emphasis is placed on hard work and on the need for achievement motivation. In Mclelland’s study of achievement motivation among the dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria, he found in the study that the level of achievement motivation was highest among the Igbo and followed by the Yoruba and the Hausa.

Though his findings have not been generally accepted, they present valid points of departure for more research. Contributing to the debate on work ethnics, J.A.O.

Ifechukwu painted a very gloomy picture in the following propositions:

1. The productivity of the Nigerian tends to be generally low.
2. The Nigerian worker tends to work productively when closely supervised.
3. The Nigerian worker displays a feeling of dissatisfaction.
4. The Nigerian worker seems to lack a sense of commitment and urgency.
5. The Nigerian worker is not public relations conscious.

The writer quoted above was, however modest enough to state that his work was purely exploratory and that more research was needed on the subject.

However, a different school of thought exists which differs in its views on labour productivity in Nigeria. For instance, we have earlier on shown that Dafe Otobo demonstrated that Nigerian workers are not lazy. Rather, the problem of productivity in Nigeria is that of incompetent and ineffective management. Similarly, Pita Ejiiofor in *Solution to Workers Bad Attitude to Work in Nigeria* states that... “The major cause of low motivation (and by extension productivity) of the Nigerian worker is that the worker does not perceive that his effort is instrumental to the attainment of rewards of work. Instrumentally is therefore the missing link in the motivational efforts in Nigerian organizations.” In a related work, Olatunde Oloko an industrial sociologist concludes that “bureaucracies must seek to introduce techniques of motivation of their members so that they may come to feel that work places are home away from home.” In pointing out the conclusions of the contending schools of thought, our aim is to highlight the differences in attitude of the Nigerian worker to work.

So far, all the studies mentioned above, none openly addressed the issue of culture and its influence on productivity. It is painful that at this level of Nigeria,s development, there is still a dearth of studies in the area of culture and management and their effects on productivity and motivation. The most comprehensive of such work was the one commissioned by the Centre for Management Development (CMD) on Culture and Management.

There are so many definitions of culture. For our purposes, we shall define culture as the sum total of man’s ways of life. By this, it involves all of man’s acquired and learned attributes by which he seeks to master and control the forces around him. Thus, culture is that which sets the standards of what is right or wrong including the mechanism of rewarding compliance and punishing deviance. It is culture that makes a group of people to be different from others. Culture is dynamic by which it affects and is affected by external influences. As a result, in this world that has been reduced to one global village, there is hardly any culture which could be said to exist in its pure form.

In relation to the above, the paper of Tokonori Kazuhara, former Japanese Ambassador to Nigeria is very illuminating. In the paper, titled *Culture and Management*, he demonstrated how culture has been so central in turning around the Japanese economy from an underdeveloped economy into one of the fastest growing economies of the world. According to him, Japanese work attitudes include, hard work, good planning, group decision, harmony within the group and savings. Continuing, he showed that the other cultural trait of the Japanese people, which has been brought into the workplace is a discipline which is seen as virtue in the individual and in the society. From him, we were able to learn that in Japan, employment is for a lifetime. This guarantees security of tenure. Added to the above, is that, for the past one hundred and twenty years Japan pursued a process of modernization which involves the constant improvement of the traditions and culture of the people by absorbing and applying science and technology. The thesis of his presentation is, management in Japan is culture centred. That it has produced commendable results speaks volumes of the critical linkages between culture and management.

There is no exaggeration in the above assertion because, today, the world is turning to Japan for models of management. Truly, at a time, one of the most popular management paradigms was Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM is nothing but Japanese culture infused into their management practices. Surprisingly, TQM gained prominence in Nigeria without first trying to discover if the same cultural factors that made it to work in Japan are existent here in Nigeria. Before Total Quality Management gained prominence, there was Peter Drucker’s *Management by Objectives (MBO)*. But a close study will show that MBO is American culture reduced to management principles and practices. Otherwise, why has it not worked universally? A variety of reasons have been adduced for its success in one place and failure in another. We submit that cultural factors in determining success or failure cannot be overlooked.

Another important contribution to the debate is that of Keith Davis. He showed that workers in the United States require general supervision while Peruvian workers prefer close supervision. The difference is due to cultural differences between the two countries.

2. Summary and Conclusions

Up to this point, we have examined the concepts of culture, work ethics and productivity in Nigeria. We have also found that only peripheral references have been made to the study of culture as it affects work ethics and productivity. More worrisome is that Nigerian organizations still do not appreciate that culture is central to motivation and productivity. In effect, Nigeria is still looking outside for management models which have worked elsewhere. Implicit in this, is the erroneous assumption that there is a one best way of motivating employees towards increased productivity. This writer agrees with Imade when he states that “We therefore suffer from barrenness of management ideas. Our present systems have no bearing on either our past or on our traditional ways of life. Until we are able to evolve our own indigenous systems, it will be difficult to describe a Nigerian management system”. It could also be concluded based on our study that, the work ethics in Nigeria is not anti productivity. On the contrary it encourages it. That the attitude to work in some instances is less than desirable could be explained by a number of factors. These include, the issue of alienation, bad management, and in some instances poor working conditions. The Nigerian worker does not feel that he is a part of the work that is being done. Programmes should be initiated to correct the notion that it is their work and not our work. In private sector establishments, the problem of alienation could be overcome by incorporating workers into the ownership structure through the selling of shares. In public bureaucracies, this problem could be largely resolved through increased worker participation in decision making. In addition, it is important that we should have objective criteria by which productivity is measured and relate it (productivity) to reward. It seems that, in most cases, the reward is for status and qualification. We want to state that, there are key cultural factors which affect productivity. These include his values, tastes, welfare, personal idiosyncracies and even a worker’s domestic life As a result we submit that, in assessing the Nigerian worker, and in the efforts of managers to motivate them, a holistic approach should be adopted by considering socio-cultural, psychological and emotional attributes.

3. References

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