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EFFECTS OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT POLITICS ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

The study work interrogates the effects of human resource development politics on employees of a leading human resource development organization, in the context of motivation, engagement and productivity. The study assumes that a preponderance of political consideration in human resource development decisions is likely to have more negative than positive impact, on employees' performance and productivity. Using Focus Group Discussion and Structured Interviews, the author collected and analyzed relevant data on the subject. The descriptive method was employed in the data collection and analysis. The hypothesis was also verified through the utilization of statistical tests. The study reveals that, due to the pervasive presence of politics in the sampled organization's skills training operations, employees have become largely dis-engaged, and are no longer willing to give their best. The study further demonstrates how the selection of employees for overseas training based on political criteria, rather than on rational or objectively determined training need analysis, could have dire consequences for interpersonal relations, team work and motivation generally. To mitigate the negative effects of politics on the human resource management infrastructure, the study recommends that staff training should always be anchored on objectively determined performance needs of employees. It further suggests that, in addition to acquiring professional skills, employees should also be exposed to appropriate political education programmes which could help them gain a better understanding of their organization's internal politics; towards enabling them to influence other people and achieve goals that are in the best interest of all stakeholders.

Keywords: Human Resource, Development, Politics, Employee, Productivity

Introduction

Politically determined human resource decisions are increasingly becoming a norm in Nigeria's corporate space, especially in public sector organizations. While a few employees may have acquired the political skills to cope with the stresses associated with workplace politics, a great majority of others who do not have the political savvy advantage continue to suffer the consequences of the political behavior of top executives and their cronies.

Aim of Study

This study interrogates the various ways in which work-related politics affect employee engagement and

productivity. A leading human resource development agency was sampled for the study; however, the identity thereof shall remain hidden, as the Interview Respondents and Focus Group Discussants agreed to speak to the researcher only on the condition of anonymity.

Assumption

The study assumes that, political behaviours and decisions on human resource development are more likely to have negative than positive impact on employee engagement and productivity in public sector organizations.

Definition of Terms

- i. Human resource development shall refer to an organization's overall strategy or plan aimed at helping employees to develop their abilities, talents, skills and knowledge.
- ii. Political behavior as used here shall refer to human behaviors and decisions relating to employees training and development which are predicated on power and politics, more than anything else. In this case, ethnicity, religion and favouritism were accorded priority in the selection of employees for training.
- iii. Employee Engagement shall refer to employees' commitment to the goals of their organization; the level of passion they feel about their jobs, and the extent to which they apply discretionary efforts in their work.
- iv. Productivity is defined in this study as the ratio of goods and services produced by employees (output), to the amount of inputs used in the production process.

Scope of Study

The study covers the period 2008 – 2013, during which time the sampled organization witnessed unprecedented preponderance of politically motivated decisions in staff training and development.

Methodology

Interview and Focus Group Discussion are the main sources of data for the research work. The data was subsequently analyzed using table, percentage, frequency and regression.

Literature Review

Political behaviours and activities which take place in organizational settings are often referred to as organizational or micro politics, as differentiated from the much wider regional or national politics involving political parties. The former brand of politics has been defined as the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization, or to obtain

sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned means (Vigoda, 2003).

Other scholars like Ogbojafor and Muo (2012) have defined the politics that takes place in organizations as the unique domain of interpersonal relations, and give its main characteristics as the readiness of people to use power in their efforts to influence others and secure personal or collective interests or, alternatively, to avoid negative outcomes within the organization. According to this view, organizational politics involves those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation where there is uncertainty or disagreement. They explain that it involves employing a constellation of forces by an individual or a group to gain advantage over others. The two authors also see organizational politics as business, because those involved in it look forward to bountiful gains as rewards for engaging in it.

Furthermore, organizational politics consists of intentional acts of influence undertaken by individuals or groups to enhance or protect their interest when conflicting courses of action are possible, with the purpose of gaining compliance from others by manipulative actions. As such, political activities within an organization may not be part of employees' formal role in the organization, but these activities do influence, or attempt to influence the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization. These perspectives indicate that organizational politics involves rivalry among organizational members and or units as they constantly jockey for their fair share of valuable resources such as training and development opportunities, or other welfare-related issues.

Influences of Power and Politics on HRD

In a comparative study of two organizational models, one bureaucratic and one entrepreneurial, Block (1990: 22) takes a look at the prominent role that politics plays in corporate organizations. He describes politics as an exchange of power that goes hand in hand with empowerment. Like Morgan (1997: 154) who perceives

politics as a “dirty word” which prevents people from recognizing its usefulness, Block sees a shadow over politics because people think of it as manipulation. Block points out that “the original meaning of politics was to act in a service of society ... of late it has lost its dignity and been reinterpreted to mean acting in service of self”.

In a radical departure from traditional thinking about power and politics, Block endorses positive, rather than negative, political acts - a view not unlike that of Coopey and Bourgoyne (2000) who argue that a political perspective widens the understanding of what constitutes learning in organizations. Block's (1990: 16)) philosophical approach mirrors Wheatley's (1992), urging that practitioners reconfigure their ideas about management in relational terms in order to eliminate what she calls the “language of defense” in organizations - memo madness, guarded personnel files, turf wars, and the use of competitive business jargon, such as offense and defense sports phrases.

Both Block (1990) and Wheatley (1992) provide refreshing approaches to the elimination of self-serving power and politics; however, neither offers suggestions to the practitioner for how to introduce new ways of thinking about power and politics, nor ideas on how to positively direct the energies of resistance that such changes will generate. Senge (1990: 272)) and Argyris (1978) initiate similar discussion that could be helpful to the practitioner.

Senge contends that the number one question in need of attention by organizations is “how can the internal politics and game playing that dominate traditional organizations be transcended?” (p. 272). He claims that organizational politics is such a perversion of truth and honesty that most organizations reek with its odour, yet most practitioners take it so for granted that they do not even notice it.

Both Argyris and Morgan (1997) consider organizations as political systems. In Argyris' view, these political systems are made up of interest groups

vying with other interest groups for control of resources and territory. Argyris prompts the researcher to ask questions, such as how members of these groups might achieve “collective awareness of the contention in which they are engaged” (p. 329) in order to convert contention into cooperation, organizational politics into organizational inquiry.

In Morgan's political systems, politicking may be an essential part of organizational life, given the divergent interests of people in the workplace and the need for consultation and negotiation to resolve differences. Pfeffer (1992:45) offers a rather clear definition of power and politics that can serve as a framework for understanding how power and politics influence organizational program planning: Power is defined as the potential ability to influence behaviour, change the course of events, overcome resistance and get people to do things they would not otherwise do. Politics and influence are the processes, the actions, the behaviours through which this potential power is utilized and realized.

Rosser et al (2013) also opine that managers who are good politicians routinely exert influence to acquire resources for their work groups, promote initiatives that they believe will benefit the firm, and motivate employees to perform. To this extent therefore, the researcher will concur that a political arena would serve functional role in organizations, especially in work environments in which training managers are confronted with forces that tend to sabotage the training function.

In this regard, a system of politics would be necessary to correct certain deficiencies and dysfunctions. Leadership could also be enhanced by politics, through bringing the strongest members of the organization into positions of authority in a somewhat Darwinian manner. In addition, politics should promote a full debate of issues, as well as promote necessary organizational change blocked by legitimate systems of influence. Other roles politics should play in organizations include facilitation of decision-making

causing the realignment of coalitions and shift in power, and speeding up the death of a spent organization.

The importance of employee training in modern work settings cannot be overemphasized. Training does not only enhance productivity, profitability and competitiveness for organizations; it guarantees a safe working environment for workers (Echu, 2001). Other benefits that derive from staff training include: increased job satisfaction and morale among employees; increased employee motivation; increased efficiency in processes, resulting in financial gain; increased capacity to adopt new technologies and methods; increased innovation in strategies and products; reduced employee turnover; and enhanced company image.

It is for these reasons that governments across the world have made employee training mandatory for employers of labour. Industrial Training Fund's enabling Decree number 47 of October 1971, as amended by Acts of Parliament in 1990 and 2011, is an example of legislation which makes the training of employed citizens compulsory.

The Need for Employee Training

Training may be defined as a set of activities aimed at enhancing an individual's effectiveness and efficiency, in relation to a given task. It is the process by which the efficiency of employees is increased and developed. Training is a specialized knowledge which is required to perform a specific job. Training also tries to improve skills, or add to the existing level of knowledge so that the employee is better equipped to do his/her present job, or to mould him/her to be fit for a job involving higher responsibilities. It bridges the gap between what the employee has and what the job demands (Echu, 2001).

The training of employees can be segmented into two broad categories: on-the-job and off-the-job. An example of the first category is providing a one-year attachment programme for newly employed staff; while

job rotation programme of three or six months may constitute an example of the second category. Since training involves time, effort and money, an organization wishing to train its employees should do so in the most systematic and professional manner. The objectives and need for training should be clearly identified, while the method or type of training should be chosen according to identified training needs and established objectives (Echu, 2009).

In practice, however, skills training is not always anchored on objectively determined performance needs of employees. It is rather predicated on the political fault lines of tribe, religion, favoritism or ethnicity. This is especially so in public sector institutions in Nigeria, including institutions that has human resource development as their main mandate. Hence, the need to interrogate the impact of politically determined human resource development practice on employee engagement and productivity, in one of Nigeria's leading HRD Organizations.

Background to the Study

The sampled organization operates in the public sector. It has over two thousand staff on its payroll, and is reputed for a dogged commitment to capacity building for employees. Every single employee enjoys at least one training programme per year. In recent years however, decisions about who to train, where, for how long and at what cost, have been determined more by political rather than rational considerations, especially with regard to the much more lucrative overseas component.

Selection for Overseas Training

It is on record that the organization trained various cadres of staff in Europe, America, Asia and other countries in Africa. However, all the overseas courses enjoyed by staff during the period covered by this study "were politically determined", according to our Interview and Focus Group sources. For instance, while the top leadership maximally utilized its "power of approval" to favour its own members with enjoyment of overseas training programmes, staff within the middle

and lower cadres were exposed to a disproportionately fewer overseas programmes during the 2008 – 2013 era.

Thus, the ratio of overseas training enjoyed by members of the top management (or Directors) and the

other categories of staff between 2008 and 2013, stood at 53:1 (FGD, 2013). The Table below provides graphic details in this regard.

Table 1: Ratio of Overseas Training for Top Executives to Other Staff

YEAR	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	TOTAL
RANK							
Directors	57	65	68	72	79	83	424
Others	333	541	345	245	305	293	2, 062
TOTAL	390	606	413	317	384	376	2486
RATIO	53:1						

Source: Career Division, 2014

As noted by Echu (2016) in another study, selection of the top executives and other categories of staff were not based on any known or verifiable criteria; rather, staff was randomly nominated for various courses by the Career Division. Hence, tens of hundreds of the Administration and Accounting personnel were selected for several courses that were originally meant for professional training staff. In the process, some Directors attended three courses in three different countries of the world on the same date, even as their cronies competed among themselves for training in their own chosen countries (Focus Group Discussion, 2012).

Meanwhile, majority of staff in the more than three dozen zonal offices who have no “political connections with head office” merely watched as their colleagues in the head office enjoyed one training course or another in Israel, Canada, Brazil, Japan, the United Kingdom or USA. An estimated ten billion Naira was spent by the organization on overseas training during the period covered by this study, without any tangible value-addition the organization’s operations (FGD, 2012; Career Division, 2014).

The Effects

While the top executives perceive a politically determined human resource practice in their organization in favorable terms, the majority of other staff sees it in largely negative terms. For instance, six

out of the eight Management staff interviewed (75%) perceive the role of politics in staff training as “positive”. Persons in this category are of the view that political behaviors have created awareness among the work-force to identify officers who have power to influence decisions (Interview sessions at Kano and Lagos, 2013).

This category of personnel also opines that politics has enabled the staff to identify winning teams within the system, and to align themselves with the winning teams. They conclude that, knowing which teams are on the winning side “will always assist officers to plan the best strategies for self-actualization” (FGD, Jos, 2013).

However, eighty-five out of the one hundred and ten interviewed respondents in the junior category (77%), including beneficiaries of overseas training themselves, said politics has had negative effects on their personal effectiveness. According to them, political activities of those who have managed the organization’s overseas training since 2008 had resulted in low morale and low productivity among employees, as reflected in lateness to work; early departure from work; lack of interest in, and commitment to the job; reluctance to accept assignments; in-fighting; withdrawal; depression; rumor mongering; unwillingness to work extra hours; and increased rate of application for casual leave (Interviews and FGD, Jos, 2014).

Interviews with staff between 2012 and 2014 revealed a disturbing emotional stress among employees: forty-seven respondents (or 23.5%) said they have become depressed as a result of a highly politicized human resource practice; another fifty-five or (27.5%) said they now come to work late and leave before the official closing time of 4:00 pm, for the same reason; yet another sixty-six respondents or (33%) have become withdrawn. This implies that work supervisors in the organization would not be able to count on such personnel for initiative, innovation and creativity which are essential for sustainable high productivity in any organization.

Similarly, thirty-two other respondents or (16%) said they no longer accept difficult assignments. Although not a significant number, this development could, and has spelt dire consequences for the much desired organizational learning and experience sharing within the organization. Be that as it may, it should be noted that the political behaviour of top management has bastardized employee engagement to a level never witnessed in the organization's history.

According to Focus Group Discussants (2012), "65 - 75% of the employees are currently not engaged; 10 - 25% others are actively dis-engaged and have been trying to ruin things for everyone else. This is perhaps the chief reason why a good number of employees have been steadily exiting the organization since 2012, even as the salary is robust" (FGD, 2013). One of the interview respondents further told the author: "I have resigned myself to fate ... I just come to work to fulfil all righteousness; at the end of day I go back to my house" (Jos, 2012).

Yet, another respondent said: "I cannot be working the extra mile to bring excellence to my organization while others get the best of available training opportunities ... There are times when one feels that the rewards for achievement or opportunities for personal advancement have been misplaced, or given to less qualified persons. In such moments, you just have to feel bad. It is just human nature." (Kano, 2013).

The views expressed above demonstrate how the politics of staff training has affected personal effectiveness, productivity and engagement among the personnel. In the words of Herzberg (1964):

Individuals are not content with the satisfaction of lower-order needs at work; for example, those needs associated with minimum salary levels or safe and pleasant working conditions. Rather, individuals look for the gratification of higher-level psychological needs having to do with achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement, and the nature of the work itself ...

Interestingly, the employees' new body language was understood early enough by management, as the latter responded by sending warning signals to "all erring staff" at intervals. This was done through memos and notice boards. One of such messages from the Administration department read:

Management has observed with grave concern the way and manner staff conduct themselves and carry out their official duties. Very worrisome is that some staff play truancy during office hours (November, 2013).

Consequently, the organization's overall performance has nose-dived since 2012. For example, the thirty-two zonal offices could not meet their training and financial targets for the years 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 consecutively. In fact, target achievement for 2013 and 2014 stagnated at a dismal 58% for both training and financial drive (Annual Performance Appraisal Reports, 2010 -14).

The views expressed by interview respondents and Focus Group participants were supported by the report of a 2014 survey conducted for the surveyed organization by an Abuja-based Consultancy Firm, *Howes Consulting Group*. The survey was tagged *Organizational Climate Survey* and was aimed at determining the productivity profile of the organization. It investigated a whole range of issues relating to staff motivation and productivity.

The survey showed, for instance, that team spirit among employees stood at 24 percent; availability and relevance of work tools was rated at 27.1 percent; reward for hard work was given as 23.4 percent; career growth opportunity stood at 27.4 percent; learning opportunity at 29.2 percent and motivation in general at 15.2 percent. Given these precarious circumstances, it is not surprising that employees' productivity plummeted to an all-time low since 2010, as indicated in the annual performance reports referred to above.

Furthermore, it should be noted that unmitigated tinkering with political fault lines in the selection of staff for overseas training has also affected the training services offered by the sampled organization to its Clients across the Federation.. Although the need for specialized overseas staff training in critical occupations such as Construction, Banking and Catering etc. was identified in the year 2000, the organization has not been able to offer competitive services to its clients in these occupational areas up till now, despite the hundreds of millions of Naira expended on overseas training for the staff. The following is one of several examples that illustrate how the organization shot itself in the foot through excessive politicking in critical training decisions.

A six months Culinary Course was organized for fifteen officers in the United Kingdom in year 2012, with the goal that these officers would resuscitate the organization's ailing Culinary Centre in Abuja, after their return. Ten million Naira was paid on each of the course participants. However, this laudable goal has not materialized several years after - the Culinary Centre remains moribund, and prospective customers who need to eat food or enjoy similar recreational services go elsewhere to satisfy their needs. What this means is that, the one hundred and fifty million Naira spent on training the fifteen officers abroad had been wasted, in addition to the lost six-month man-hours.

The chief reason why this particular programme's objective (and indeed all other overseas programmes's

objectives) was not realized is that the organization's Training Policy was largely not adhered to. For instance, most of the trainees of the programme under reference were staff on Grade Levels 08 – 12, and were employed between 2001 and 2010. This implies that junior personnel were selected for the programme in preference to their senior and more experienced colleagues who had worked in the organization since the decade of the 1980s and 90s. Besides, only three out of the fifteen participants had relevant qualification for the course (two of them had HND in Hotel and Catering, while the third had HND in Food Technology). Five of the remaining twelve trainees had a background in Social Science; one in Engineering; two in Education; two in Business Management; and two in Accounting. This is clearly a violation of the organization's Training Policy which stipulated *seniority* and *relevance* of proposed training as criteria for nomination to such programmes. The Policy states in part, that:

Criteria for staff selection for training shall include relevance of course to the organization's needs, seniority, satisfactory performance of duty, ability to benefit from the course and evidence of Admission into the appropriate institution. (p. 68).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The following measures are recommended, towards mitigating the negative impact of politics on employee training and development, as we have seen in this study.

- i. Equity and fair play should be the watch word in all human resource development decisions. Strict adherence to the Training Policy Document will go a long way to restoring employees' confidence in the organization's capacity building operations.
- ii. Training should be based on an objective assessment of each employee's skills needs, prior to conduct of the training intervention.

- iii. Employees should be given opportunity to utilize new knowledge or skills gained from any training programme attended by them.
- iv. Effort should be made by the organizations' Top Executives to ensure that politics works for the good of all employees, rather than the current practice where selection for lucrative training opportunities are based on religion, favoritism,

tribal affiliation or blood relationship. They should also institutionalize political education, or create awareness among employees regarding the inevitable presence of politics in corporate organizations, and to equip them with techniques for handling the stresses associated with the political behavior of others in the work place.

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