

Challenges of Productivity and Work Ethics for Local Governments in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian public service (including the local government service) has gone through series of reforms and restructuring since 1976. The main aim of these reforms/guidelines has been to overcome the challenges of development and hence strengthen and foster socio-economic improvements at the grassroots. Despite the various reforms at the local government level, not much has been achieved in terms of meeting the yearning of the grassroots people. Employees in most of the local government councils display very poor work ethics with concomitant implication for the survival of the local government administration. This challenge of negative work attitude seems to have been taken for granted in most academic discourse and in the various local government reform agenda. It is in this connection therefore that this paper attempts to examine the factors that affects work attitude among local government employees. Secondary data was used to examine the concept of work ethics to see how it impact on the productivity of local government employees. It was found that poor working condition; poor work infrastructure, poor remuneration, and inadequate motivation among others were responsible for the poor work ethics among employees of local government service in Nigeria. It was recommended among others that the general work environment should be made conducive and basic working facilities provided to adequately engage the sources of the employees in the local governments for increased productivity.

Keywords: Work ethic, Public services, Reforms, Local Government, Productivity

INTRODUCTION

The public service (including the local government service) is a collection of specialized governmental institutions or agencies established by law, financed by public funds and staffed by professionals as career bureaucrats for the purpose of executing public policies. The central concern of government in the Nigerian civil service has been the issue of productivity. However, low productivity is a key challenge that has wrestled against the public service, especially at the local government level in recent times. This is so especially in the highly mismanaged economy of Nigeria, where productivity measurement may seem to be particularly difficult or irrelevant, especially in the civil service (Yesufu, 2000).

The Federal Military Government had noted the problems of local government when it stated through the then Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, in the 1976 Guideline for local government reforms that:

Local governments have over the years suffered from the continuous whittling down of their powers... Lack of adequate funds and appropriate institutions has continued to make local government ineffective and ineffectual... Consequently, there has been a

divorce between the people and government institutions at their most basic level (Local Government Reforms, 1976:1).

The local government system have been seen to be experiencing stagnation and decay, due largely to the supposedly negative work ethics on the part of workers in the one hand and the nature of the organization on the other. Since work ethics is a critical determinant of effectiveness and hence productivity in private and public organizations especially at the local governments, it is important to address such challenges with a view to reposition it for effective service delivery to the grassroots people.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ITS MISSION

The Nigerian Federal Government Blueprint or reform guidelines that preceded the 1976 Local Government Reforms defined local government as:

Government at local level exercised through representative council established by law to exercise powers within defined areas..., has substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and ensure that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

Also, Egwurube in Adamolekun, Olowu and Layleye (eds.) (1988) defines local government as: "Government at the local level exercised through representative council with statutory defined powers to initiate and direct resource allocation among a given range of prescribed (developed) functions within delimited jurisdictional boundaries" (1988:157). Generally, Local Government can be defined as the breakdown of a country or state into small units or localities for the purpose of administration in which the inhabitants of the different units or localities concerned play direct and full part through their elected representatives who exercise power or undertake transactions under the general authority of the national or central government. There is hardly any government anywhere in the world that can ignore the imperatives of a tier of government at this level.

The basic mission of the local governments as captured in the 1976 Guideline for Local Government Reforms and the Fourth Schedules of the 1979, 1989, 1995, and 1999 Nigerian constitutions include the following:

1. To decongest government at the centre and thereby freeing national leaders from onerous details and unnecessary involvement in local issues.
2. To increase the peoples' understanding and support for social and economic activities.
3. To make programmes to foster social economic betterment at the local level more realistic and lasting.
4. To train people in the art of self-government.
5. To strengthen national unity.

Local government which is expected to be the instrument of grassroots development has suffered and will continue to suffer from the inability to manage effectively. This Third World disease of mismanagement has worsened by the current intensified attitudes of using public office for personal enrichment and systematic illegalities. Such illegalities coupled with the very poor work ethics of local government workers have further eroded the productive base of local governments. For instance, most workers no longer seem to find value or satisfaction in the work they do. Etuk (1981) captures this trend when he stated that:

“There is a myth about the nature and work life of the average Nigerian public servant. It projects the picture of a complacent individual whose sense of responsibility has been dulled by frustration and negativism” (1981:13).

Such attitudes at the long run affects the overall work behaviour and therefore productivity. Thus, the status of workers in the local governments especially and the public service in general could be questioned from the point of view of dwindling productivity and inefficiency in resource allocation (Adamolekun, 1989). The local governments in Nigeria are no longer productive. That productivity in the civil service in Nigeria, especially the local governments, has dwindled in recent times is no longer in doubt as conditions of service (including salaries) is not favourable compared to other Third World countries. It is on this background that the ₦18,000 (Eighteen thousand naira) minimum wage law has continued to receive resounding appreciation from workers. Professor Adebayo has currently concluded that local governments have failed in three specific areas: non-delivery of needed services, lack of accountability, and serving as a model of good governance.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Situational Perspective

Significant research endeavours on workplace ethics have focused on the long standing “person-situation” debate (Allport, 1937; Mischel, 1968; and Baker, Hunt & Andrew, 2006). Those who are inclined to the individual (person) difference perspective believe that one’s values, motives, and traits determine ethical behaviour. In the same vein, those who are inclined to the situational perspective maintain that the characteristics of the situation or organizational environment account for variance in ethical behaviour.

Combining these two views is the interactionist perspective’ (Baker, *et al*, 2006), in which both individual and situational characteristics contribute to behaviour (Schneider, 1983). This perspective underlies Trevino’s (1986) model of ethical decision making. Trevino proposed that the relationship between one’s stage of cognitive moral development and ethical/unethical behaviour was moderated by the individual variables of ego-strength, field dependence, and locus of control and by the organizational level variables of job context, culture, and characteristics of the work.

What can be inferred from the above is that a combination of individual attitude which has to do with his feeling, habit, and beliefs couple with the cultural background and value system of the individual worker in relation to the organizational environment and job requirements positively or negatively affect the individual’s behaviour. In other words, work attitude affects the way and manner a worker relates to, conceive, and view his job. That is to say, Local Government employees would be productive if they project a positive work attitude. The reverse would also be the case.

Work Ethics of Local Government Workers

Local government workers in this context are those employed directly by the various local government service commission and other government agencies working in the local government areas. For the purpose of analysis, is the local government worker different from other workers in the country? Experience has shown that the local government worker is not quite different from any other worker except that he works in a different environment, varying cultural background and value systems. These differences have significantly affected his attitude to work and productivity. Attitude to work is a critical determinant of effectiveness and hence productivity in organization. For Okoh (2003), it has to do with the feeling, habit, and beliefs that affect the individual’s behaviour to work. Some beliefs, habits,

feelings, and motives are supportive of positive work ethics and therefore necessary for the performance of specific jobs. On the other hand, there may also be experiences and behaviour that are supportive of negative attitude to work. The work attitude affects the way a worker relates to conceives, and views his job. It shows how committed, dedicated, hardworking, and performing a worker is in relation to the objectives of the local government system.

What can be deduced from the above is that workers with positive attitude to work will be highly committed, dedicated, and hardworking to make sure that the basic mission of the local government are achieved and not engage in unethical behaviour that will run down the local government system, as far as their overall growth and productivity are concerned. What could possibly explain the change of attitude to work of local government workers? Could it be because the needs of workers and the requirements for effective job performance are not accorded expected consideration? The section that follows will attempt to answer these questions and more through a critical analysis of some of the key factors that determines work attitude especially among local government employees.

Determinants of Work Ethics and Implication for Local Government Productivity

Some factors that determine work attitude among local government workers and their implications for their productivity are herein presented and discusses. They include:

- a. Environmental determinism
- b. General conception of work in a society
- c. Social and cultural factors
- d. Condition of the job
- e. The historical problems of political instability
- f. Poor work infrastructure, and
- g. The problem of poor motivation

Environmental Determinism

Okoh (2003) is of the opinion that, work attitudes are learned and acquired from the environment and personal experiences. That is to say, how an individual conceives his job may be a product of his general conception, perception, and beliefs about a particular job, the experiences of the society, or the individual experience as he makes life. For example, the status of a job in terms of the social and economic status associated with the job can generate or deplete positive work attitude. Secondly, most workers in the local government service perceive government job as not belonging to anyone in particular. This conception makes the worker an alien and stranger in the workplace with the government as a distant element. It is common to hear people say; “government work is not my father’s work, therefore, it should be carried on the shoulder and not on the head”. This means that, there should be less commitment and dedication to government work, and if the job suffers, nobody is hurt.

General Conception of Work in a Society

A society for instance might place value on hard work, honesty at work, and the individual contribution to the achievement of the objectives of organization. In such society, handwork increases recognition, respect, status and popular acceptance, but this is not the case in our local government systems. In Nigeria generally, social values have been changed from hard work to the accumulation of money and material property and so those who have money tend to have more status and recognition in the Nigeria society. In this case, hard work no longer counts. Such negative work attitude has implication on the overall productivity of local government employees

Social and Cultural Factors

Some social and cultural factors also affects work ethics and hence productivity at the local government level. Such social and cultural factors include; the extended family system and communalistic nature of Nigerians which breed favouritism, nepotism, ethnic and other vices; the excessive respect for age causes distortions of authority relations between young bosses and older subordinates; and the heavy burden of extended family responsibilities tend to encourage financial impropriety among public officers. Such contradiction breed a state of lawlessness among local government employees in the handling of the affairs of the council and hence impact negatively on their productivity.

Condition of the Job

Another factor that increases or depletes positive work attitude and hence productivity is the condition of the job. For example, the low purchasing power and deplorable working condition of services place the local government worker in a disadvantaged position relative to its counterpart in the private sector and multinational companies in terms of wages and salaries. Such relative advantages have often generated frustration, disillusionment, and financial impropriety and poor work attitude among Nigeria public service workers. The high level of corruption, absenteeism and indiscipline may be attributed to economic pressures on the poorly paid workforce in the local governments. Often times, employees at this level abandon their official duties in search of alternative means of livelihood (Ushie, Agba, Agba, & Best, 2010). Such negative work attitude has grave implication on the productivity of local government employees.

Political Instability

The problem of political instability in Nigeria with its consequent weak military leadership for over two decades is yet another factor that has depleted the spirit of loyalty patriotism and rationalism in Nigeria's public servants. In its place, a high level of selfishness, ethnicity, religious, and sectional loyalties have blossomed with consequences for negative work ethics and therefore low productivity especially at the local government level. Such degeneration of patriotism and national interest is manifested in the high level of corruption, fraud, poverty, indiscipline, looting of government property and hoarding prevalent in Nigeria society today. This scenario has even been multiplied in the present civilian regime where workers (especially local government employees) hide under ethnic and tribal loyalty to subvert democratic principles which has negative implications on local government productivity.

Poor Work Infrastructure

Poor work infrastructure is yet another factor which determines work attitudes of the average local government worker. For instance, where basic facilities are available, and the work environment is conducive, the workers' morale and productivity may be positively affected. Unfortunately many public establishment in Nigeria lacks basic facilities; either they are not available at all or are inadequate. For example there are inadequate medical facilities for doctors at the local government levels; stationary is no longer available in most of our public offices or establishments across the country. In such a situation, what kind of attitude should be expected? Certainly, negative attitude to work. A worker without enthusiasm for work, finding himself without facilities, feels frustrated, demoralized, and can leave the office at any time possibly in search of supplementary livelihood because he has no material to work with (Ushie, *et al*, 2010)

The Problem of Poor Motivation

Most often, the reward system in our public services, especially at the local governments, is not adequately administered to the extent that those workers that really merit one form of award or the other are not considered. For instance, people that are known to be lazy but have connections are being promoted to the detriment of hardworking ones. Unable to trust themselves under the system of promotion by merit, these employees invoke the myth of ethnic hurdles and detractors and manipulate ethnic sentiments in order to be promoted. This, to say the least does not encourage positive work attitude and therefore productivity.

Such negative work attitude was eloquently on by Leba (2005), who asserted that “the behaviour of members of a society or a nation will become aberrant; that is, there would be lack of motivation and a reluctance to abide with the protocol and rules when the reasonable expectations of the people in a nation are unreachable”. According to him “the downward slide into anarchy will be further propelled when the system of work and reward becomes skewed in favour of the idle and parasitic elements in the society”. The dangerous signal posed by this scenario, he maintained are made more alarming by the discontent amongst the currently employed labour force.

CONCLUSION

From the general system failure being experienced at the local level in Nigerian and the scathing criticism of the local government poor performance across the country, it evident that the proposed engine of growth and development at the grassroots level is almost “knocking” or has knocked in some areas (Egonmwan, 2002). It means that the above mission set for the local government is not been fulfilled unless we face the challenges of poor productive base arising from the negative work ethics of the local government workers, our hope to positively repositioning local government administration for effective service delivery may be permanently dashed. In this regard therefore, the needs of the worker and the lack of adequate tools vis-a-vis his working conditions (including wages and salaries) must be frontally addressed. It is hoped that if workers are satisfied and happy with their work, their commitment and dedication to work would improve and therefore overall productivity, especially at the local government levels.

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