

WORK ETHICS, ATTITUDE AND PERFORMANCE IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Work ethics and attitudes are essential principles and socio-psychological human behaviours that derive organisational performance. Like any other sector, the Nigerian public service is built on certain ethical principles to improve its performance and professionalism. However, It has been perceived that the service delivery crisis over the past decades in the Nigerian public service has been associated with the collapse of ethical and professional standards in virtually every aspect of government. This paper examines the effects of work ethics and attitudes on the performance of Nigerian public service. The paper employs qualitative desk research using secondary data from literature, government publications and public service rules documents. It was found that poor attitudes and unethical practices such as corruption, nepotism and lack of accountability characterised the service. It was recommended that the service remain apolitical, avoid patronage and nepotism and uphold the accountability mechanism. It concludes that unless deliberate attempts are made to keep to extant public service rules and ethical values to guide its conduct, the goals of achieving efficient, accountable and professionally driven public service will remain a mirage.

KEYWORDS: *Attitudes, Nigeria, performance, Public Service, Work ethics*

INTRODUCTION

Given the dynamic and complex difficulties that Nigerians encounter daily, the work environment has grown vulnerable to changes occurring more or less simultaneously outside their organisational settings. Such exigencies and dynamism are manifestly and latently conferring on the work environment new attributes (both positivity and negativity), which is gradually changing the organisational value orientation and employee's attitude to work (Abiyeyi, 2014); hence, the amount of work ethics and values that are domiciled within an organisation is now an evolving trend that is beginning to function as a mark of differentiation or critical edge. Therefore, if an organisation is to attain higher performance in the face of the expanding global economy, it must practice work ethics and embrace positive attitudes as part of its organisational culture.

Every organisation's performance is influenced by its work ethics and attitudes. This is because the most valuable resource in every entity is its people. Every organisation's success is dependent on the performance of every employee. Individual ethics and attitudes are constructed on the foundation of values. These three elements (attitude, ethics, and values) shape a person's personality profile; hence, the performance of an individual in an organisation is unequivocally a manifestation of his attitude towards his job. Work ethic is, therefore, an essential precondition for organisational success regardless of the environment setting.

"Work ethic" refers to the ideals and concepts governing how employees work in an organisation. Employee's work ethic encompasses a variety of actions, attitudes, and other factors. Because of the

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output they can create, employees with a strong work ethic are frequently more highly valued. Work ethic is a quality that many administrators would like their employees to have because it has a substantial nexus with workplace productivity.

As an employee (be it in a leadership position or as a follower), it is critical to consider how your work ethic affects your workplace because it can make or break your career. People who enjoy their work and appreciate the workplace are more likely to generate more. They make better use of their time, perform better and have a strong work ethic. Conversely, some people need to make better use of their time. If you or your employees are not giving it their all, it might harm the entire organisation's gamut.

The Nigeria Public Service is built on ethical standards and professionalism (Fleishman & Payne, 1980). However, the public service is perceived to be corrupt and inefficient with poor performance. This paper examined the ethical issues and attitudes of Nigeria Public service towards its performance.

1. THE CONCEPT OF WORK ETHICS

Work ethics can be defined as a set of moral principles, particularly as they pertain to human behaviour (Gupta, 1995). Work ethics is defined as what is ethically correct, honourable, and acceptable to most people in an organisation, society, or group. The code of behaviour has also evolved into a collection of social, group, or organisational norms. Ethics deals with moral duty, obligation, and what is good and wrong. Work ethics can be defined as a collection of values that include the proper attitude, proper behaviour, respect for others, and efficient workplace communication. Work ethics govern what an employee should conduct in various scenarios within the firm. The habit of adhering to good work ethics is intrinsic, meaning it comes from within.

An individual's work ethic is derived from their values. Our surroundings, experiences, and life events shape our values. Parents, teachers, friends, classmates, competitors, and anybody else who has shaped or formed our worldview are examples of these influences. Workers with good work ethics are considered for promotions and increased responsibility. They are aware that their behaviours at work have a direct impact on others. This conscientiousness persuades individuals to adopt a responsible attitude toward their actions. These people do not require constant pushing or supervision. They are self-driven and vital to their companies. These employees are highly dependable, and their supervisors value what they provide. They are honest, responsible and reliable assets to their organisations.

Administrators create an organisational environment that supports strong work ethics and ethical decision-making by institutionalising ethics (Birknishaw, 1993). This entails incorporating moral ideals into their respective organisations' daily activities. Establishing a code of ethics is the most popular technique to institutionalise ethics. However, more than simply setting an ethical code is required. Some organisations make employees sign the code and use ethics criteria in their performance evaluations. Other organisations also link remuneration and awards to ethical incentives. Managers should also take advantage of opportunities to encourage and recognise ethical behaviour publicly. Employees should be encouraged to inform management about unethical practices. Administrators must, above all, led by example via ethical behaviour and procedures. Employees must perform ethically and disregard widely accepted social standards that damage others. A code is a set of regulations, principles, or guidelines governing people's behaviour. Ethics codes do not simply apply to government and business organisations. They should manage people's behaviour in all organisations and daily life. The existence of an organisation's code of ethics and any governance structure put in place to support it should be made public to all employees. Any exceptions to the code of ethics or rules controlling ethics procedures should also be disclosed. Details of the code of ethics must be widely circulated, including:

- The existence and responsibilities of an ethics committee;
- the punishments for violations of the code of ethics, reporting systems, and

- "whistleblower" protection measures and policies for disseminating and promoting the code of ethics.

Work ethics is a cultural norm that attaches a positive moral worth to doing a good job and is founded on the concept that work has intrinsic value in and of itself. Like other cultural norms, a person's adherence to or belief in work ethics is primarily influenced by socialisation events during childhood and adolescence (Akonti, 2013). A person "learns to value work behaviour as others approach him in situations requiring growing responsibility for productivity" through interaction with family, friends, and influential adults. Youngster evaluates their success in home tasks or later in part-time work, depending on praise or criticism, affection or wrath. However, this evaluation is dependent on the perspective of others. As a youngster ages, these attitudes toward work become more internalised, and work performance becomes less reliant on others' emotions (Akonti, 2013).

2. CODE OF CONDUCT AND THE FOUNDATION OF WORK ETHICS IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

The Nigerian public sector has established ethical standards through the Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal Act, Public Service Rules, and Financial Regulations (Sanda and Ibrahim, 2023; Office of the Head of Service of the Federation, 2008 and 2020; Tunde and Omobolaji, 2009; Ikotun, 2004). Among them are:

Discipline: Officers who want to lead others should be disciplined individuals. They must always remember that effective leadership requires excellent character, hard work, and openness. One of the prerequisites for advancement is good behaviour. Officers should be aware of government regulations and standards governing good behaviour.

Loyalty: Officers who aspire to be leaders must demonstrate unwavering allegiance to their superiors and the current administration. They must prioritise loyalty to the highest moral ideals and the country before loyalty to individuals, political parties, or government agencies.

Honesty: Civil servants should be truthful in their work and interactions with the public. They should understand that they are given wages for their work and are not entitled to anything in the shape of money or goods from anyone during their tasks.

Courage: In carrying out their tasks, civil workers must be courageous. They must never discriminate by bestowing special favours or privileges on anyone, whether for remuneration or not, and they must never accept favours or benefits for themselves or family members under circumstances that could be interpreted as influencing the performance of duties by reasonable people.

Courtesy: Civil servants must always be courteous when performing their regular jobs. Being courteous to your coworkers and the general public you serve is entirely free. Remember that people are more likely to follow pleasant instructions. In addition, citizens value courtesy and consideration for government employees. It is simpler to get along with others when they are courteous in the office and public. Indeed, a heavy workload or any other reason cannot excuse civil servants' lousy temper.

Cooperation: No one is entirely self-sufficient since no one is an island. We all rely on one another to survive. Nobody knows everything. All employees in a ministry department must work together as a team to achieve the department's ultimate goal. A ministry's officers and staff should work together as a team to achieve the ministry's objectives.

Tact: Tact refers to the ability to handle a challenging circumstance without offending the persons involved. In the public sector, this is critical. Engaging with people and creating an appearance of a desire to help improves the office's efficiency and provides public satisfaction. Maintain these values, always remembering that public office is a public trust.

3. IMBIBING WORK ETHICS THROUGH ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

Attitude is a psychological condition in which a person is focused on things, events, and people in their psychological world. Employee attitudes in the workplace can significantly impact the company as a whole. Attitude is one of the hidden, difficult-to-measure aspects that can make or break a company's success. For better or worse, employee attitudes significantly impact an organisation's productivity, both directly and indirectly, through the effect on other job-related aspects.

Negative attitudes are highly poisonous to all categories of organisations and can potentially ruin organisational success. Citizens bother and inconvenience public personnel who have a lousy attitude. A positive and engaged attitude, on the other hand, is more likely to result in civility, emotional engagement, and genuine concern for the citizen's well-being and satisfaction. A variety of things influence employee attitudes. Among them are:

- Values;
- Workplace environments, such as supervisors, tools, corporate policies, and
- company cultures; Competence; and Commitment

Employee organisations have opinions about the global environment, employment security or uncertainty, product or department prestige, and plant location, among other things. The individual's attitudes about these aspects reflect his or her apathy or excitement for the organisation's actions and goals. One distinguishing element of attitude is that it differs in:

- The extent of consciousness (individual awareness of his or her views);
- direction (favourable – unfavourable); and
- intensity (how strongly it is held).

In order to manage efficiently, managers in businesses must comprehend and know their employees' attitudes. Attitudes have an essential role in the hiring, promotion, and growth of employees (Omisore and Adeleke 2015)

Attitudes serve four important functions, and these are:

Adjustment Function: Attitudes are a tool for achieving desired outcomes or avoiding unpleasant outcomes.

The Ego-Defensive Function: The role of defending our self-image is this. When people cannot admit their emotions of inferiority, they defend their feelings against a handy minority group and buttress their egos with superior attitudes toward this minority group.

The Value-Expressive Function: This function is defined in terms of an individual's positive expressions in the thoughts of others. These attitudes clarify the self-image and mould it closer to the heart's goal.

The Knowledge Function: This function is motivated by a desire to comprehend and make sense of the universe. Employees will keep attitudes suited to the situation and reject outmoded attitudes that contribute to contradictions and inconsistencies (Omisore and Adeleke, 2015; Ekenimoh, 2013).

4. WORK ETHICS, ATTITUDES AND JOB PERFORMANCE

Ethical Attitudes are crucial in organisations because they influence job behaviour. A person can have millions of ethical attitudes, but with poor performance. Here we will focus on job attitudes and some of the important job attitudes are:

Job Satisfaction: This refers to a person's general attitude about employment. A person with high job satisfaction has a positive attitude toward their employment, whereas someone with poor job satisfaction has a negative attitude toward their job.

Job Involvement: This attitude assesses how much a person identifies with his or her self-worth in terms of performance. Employees with high levels of involvement in their jobs are more productive, satisfied, and less inclined to resign than those with low involvement.

Organisational Commitment: This attitude expresses an individual's organisational orientation, in which he or she identifies with a particular organisation and its aims and wishes to remain a member. Positive attitude and good work ethics can, therefore, be developed and maintained in an organisation through the following:

Respect and Communication

Organisations guarantee that employees demonstrate respect in the workplace by requiring that all employees value each other's perspectives and treat all stakeholders with dignity. Productivity drops when employees have bad sentiments toward other colleagues because they are from a different culture or religion. Organisations can help their employees improve their performance/productivity by supporting activities that help teams work together better, such as workshops with team-building exercises to increase communication, solve problems, and make good decisions.

Cooperation and Teamwork

Effective administrators create cooperation and teamwork by incorporating subordinates into the decision-making process. These managers help minimise production disruptions caused by unnecessary conflict by strengthening conflict management skills. Effective managers lead by example, maintaining high levels of integrity and communicating honestly and freely with their employees. Team members who feel respected and trusted by their superiors have higher job satisfaction and a positive attitude about their work. This usually results in increased productivity, lower operational expenses, and more customer satisfaction.

Appearance and Character

Employees with a good attitude about their jobs are more likely to accept company rules and dress code, follow safety procedures, follow ethical standards, and exercise self-discipline at all times. Company policies on work ethics often require employees to consider how their actions would be reported in the media. If an employee is concerned about being viewed negatively by the public for his or her conduct, he or she should refrain from acting in a way that would condemn him or her. Distractions from immoral and unethical behaviour diminish performance and disturb the work environment for everyone.

Attendance and Organisation

Effective employees usually do the work they were hired to complete by arriving on time and leaving on time. Unexpected absences or missed appointments hampered production, which had a ripple effect throughout the company—employees with a positive attitude toward work completed tasks on schedule and ensured client satisfaction. High ethical standards lead to employee trust, respect, and productivity/performance when organisations deal with wrongdoing consistently and prohibit retaliation against employees who report poor behaviour.

5. UNETHICAL PRACTICES AND NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE PERFORMANCE

Despite efforts by successive Nigerian governments to maintain ethical standards and values and change attitudes to improve the Nigerian Public Service's performance, various obstacles remain in the way of being considered among the finest in the world. The following are some of these difficulties (David, 2012):

- The Nigerian public service is frequently depicted as self-serving, venal, and nepotistic
- Other fundamental difficulties affecting the Nigerian public service include unethical behaviour and non-accountability.
- Fraud, extortion, embezzlement, bribery, influence peddling, and conferring favours on friends must be addressed.

- Corruption in the form of public officials or other persons soliciting or accepting, directly or indirectly, any monetary or other benefits, such as a (induced) gift, favour, promise, or advantage for himself or another person or entity, in exchange for any act or omission in the performance of his or her public functions. This includes directly or indirectly offering or granting to a public official or any other person illicitly to acquire benefits for himself or a third party (Akhakpe, 2001).

Another issue confronting the Nigerian public service is gross indiscipline. Gross indiscipline has taken many shapes in today's world. Lack of accountability, unethical behaviour, and corrupt activities have become so ubiquitous in Nigeria that they have become institutionalised standards of behaviour to the point where it is easy to speak of an ethics problem in the Nigerian public sector (Ibietan and Joshua, 2013)

The following unethical behaviour and practices have become institutionalised in Nigeria today since the majority finds them acceptable and usual. Leaders do not take them seriously because they stand to benefit from such unethical acts and their poor influence on public service performance. According to Osaghae (1991), these issues are due to the colonial past. He claimed that the colonial past plays a significant role in the public sector's ethical deterioration. People used to enjoy stealing government money and property to release their frustrations with the colonialists. This act was often viewed as patriotic and heroic by the public.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The organisation can impact work ethics and attitudes through training, motivation, and coaching. They cannot, however, be changed forcibly because they are inherent. If these initiatives fail to improve things, harsher actions may be taken. The organisation's management plays a critical role in fostering employee dedication. The vast majority of people want to work for an organization that; pays competitive wages in its industry; offers possibilities for promotion; ensures that all employees have equal opportunity; and treats all employees fairly. Most people would wish to work in such an organisation until they retire. The organisation's challenge is to create such an institution while remaining profitable. Transparency and accountability are two crucial aspects of work ethics for efficient service delivery and greater performance. The creation of a new work ethic will necessitate a holistic approach. In contrast, strict commitment to the public service's work ethics and principles will benefit the sector and, invariably, the Nigerian polity (Okeniyi, 2013). As a result, every employee must use the Public Service Rules to guide his or her good conduct and enable him or her to benefit from the rights and privileges given entirely.

The Nigerian Public Service has been painted negatively, but things have yet to reach the point of no return. Things can be corrected. According to Rasheed (1995), persistent attempts have been undertaken to eliminate corrupt practices and unethical infractions in the public sector in Nigeria and other developing countries. As a result, safeguards should be put in place to prevent excessive involvement in Nigeria's public sector appointments, postings, and promotions.

The civil service should be given autonomy, as is the case in developed countries such as the United Kingdom (U.K). The civil service, should be encouraged to stay political and not be tied to a single party or leader (Birkinshaw, 1993). Furthermore, efforts should be made to place in power political leaders who have integrity and competence and can be looked up to with regard and respect rather than disdain, as is the case now. Ethics has become a casualty in Nigerian public service, which is a cause for serious concern. Our public institutions have turned into more of private business. Public officials resort to primitive accumulation of resources with impunity without recourse for national interest.

Oladunni (2000) proposed that every public sector institution should establish a code of conduct in addition to the constitutional clause and other extant laws and standards. All employees should be required to sign a statement agreeing to follow the code of conduct. Organisations should also

guarantee that appropriate punishments are applied consistently and firmly when persons break the code of conduct (Fatile, 2013).

The government should also launch a moral campaign. This strategy aids in launching a vast propaganda campaign urging public officials to be disciplined and practice moral principles. Moral decay is a terrible disease that needs to be tackled in public, private, and governmental organisations. The government should also establish a system for rewarding excellent ethical behaviour. When an individual demonstrates exceptional discipline, such behaviour should be rewarded in terms of position, money, and kindness (Adebayo, 2014). All of the actions mentioned above, as well as others, are required if we are serious about restoring the integrity of Nigeria's public sector and, as a result, improving its performance.

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