CULTURALLY DIVERSE WORKFORCE AND PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN PEOPLE'S MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity finds relevance in contemporary workplace in the face of increasing workforce migration, women's participation among other drivers. Contemporary organisations are therefore rarely culturally homogeneous. Workers from different cultural backgrounds necessarily have to interact to attain goals. Effective management of the human resource would therefore involve devising means of ensuring that this diversity yields positive dividends for the organisation. This is the fate of the Nigerian public service that comprises a workforce of highly varied culture going by the huge number of ethnic groups within the country. This paper examines the challenges cultural diversity poses to the Nigerian Public Service which is basically that of diversity management which should be addressed within the context of people's management both at the governance and managerial levels. It reviewed methods used and efforts made by successive governments to make cultural diversity a blessing rather than a curse. It advocates the complex leadership theory, a leadership framework that recognizes the instability and unpredictability of a diverse workplace such as the Nigerian public service.

Keywords: Culture diversity, Performance, Nigerian Public Service, Complex Leadership Theory

Introduction

The modern workforce has undergone a drastic turnaround within the last three decades in terms of its composition on a number of attributes such as gender, race, religion, culture etc. From a global perspective, this change is largely informed by globalization. Human capital movement results in people working in places, organisations, countries whose cultural, political, religious inclinations are different from those in which they were brought up. As the world becomes interconnected via globalisation, the number of people living and working outside of their native countries is increasing. As a consequence, those in the workplace are increasingly expected to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds; often this means people who speak different languages, lead different lifestyles, and come from widely disparate belief systems and cultural backgrounds (Tong, 2011). Considering the need to attain organization goals and compete successfully, organisations reach out beyond their immediate environments to source for individuals with the cutting edge knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to drive the organizations. Workforce diversity is influenced greatly by the search for talent. This has made diversity of the workplace one of the most important management issues to emerge over the last thirty year (Jones & George, 2011).

Nigeria happens to be one of the most diverse nations of the world with multiple ethnic groups, languages, dialects and religions. These have contributed in shaping the culture of Nigeria. A nation with diverse ethnic groups and thus cultural diversity would indubitably face difficulties in formulating, articulating and implementing strategies that would be acceptable to its vast constituency, Mbakogu (2002). This is because a people's cultural orientation can create stereotypes that militate against minorities; women, certain religious groups etc. and this can degenerate into crisis situations that hamper development initiatives if not well handled. This situation as evidenced in the Nigerian Public Service, known for its high cultural diversity, especially at the federal level, has led to an increasingly poor performance in virtually all its constituents over the years. The economic/development setback Nigeria has suffered resulting from the dysfunctional and ineffective public institutions and weak governance has, many a time, been attributed to diversity, the much difference in the people's way of life (World Bank, 2000). Consequently, ethnic diversity has been viewed quite negatively in some circles as an obstacle to economic development in Nigeria (Sowell (2004).

The Nigerian Public Service refers to government parastatals, which are the operational arm of government ministries as well as the ministries, department and agencies (MDAs). It encompasses the civil service, the armed Forces, the judiciary, the police, parastatals, government owned companies and statutory Agencies. Culturally, the Nigerian Public Service is a heterogeneous entity consisting of individuals from several ethnic groups. The performance challenge in the Public Service has been and still is an issue of great concern of successive

governments in Nigeria. It has led to reforms after reforms that have failed to bring about the anticipated changes. Underlying this problem is the diversity factor. According to Easterly and Levine (1997) and Sowell (2004), this level of ethnic diversity has been an obstacle to economic development in Nigeria and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa with similar levels of heterogeneous populations. Where a nation-state is made up of heterogeneous groups, the equality of the partners can only be guaranteed if that heterogeneity is reflected (or to use a familiar terminology, "mainstreamed") in government structures, policies, and programmes. To "manufacture" a consensus under such circumstances it would have to strike at the heart of equality, and in the process, invite stiff, sometimes, armed, resistance from the victims of what is perceived as the hegemonic (nay, internal colonialist) practice (Walzer, 1983).

This study aims at examining perceived leadership behaviour (people's management) in a multi cultural context and the way this relates to performance in the Nigerian Public Service.

Definitions of Diversity

"A group is diverse if it is composed of individuals who differ on a characteristic on which they base their own social identity"(O'Reilly, Williams, & Barsade 1998, p. 186). The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies (Jack & Dobbin, 2005). Diversity plainly means difference. Diversity has to do with recognizing that everyone is different in a variety of visible and non-visible ways (The Law Society of Scotland, 2013). This broad definition of diversity provides an understanding of the dynamics of an heterogeneous workforce that helps to address the interactive effects of multi-dimensional diversity.

 Cleff and Harrison (2009) affirm that diversity management includes knowing how to relate to those qualities and conditions that are different from our own and outside the groups, to which we belong, yet are present in other individuals and groups. These include but are not limited to age, ethnicity, class, gender, physical abilities/qualities, race, sexual orientation, as well as religious status, gender expression, educational background, geographical location, income, marital status, parental status, and work experiences. These categories of difference are not always rigid but also can be fluid, respects individual rights to self-identification, and also recognizes that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another.

Prior to the emergence of the concept of diversity in the human relations literature, organisations could not have been regarded as homogenous. Organisations have more or less existed as heterogeneous systems, comprising people of mixed attributes. The difference between today's and early workforce lies in the degree of the workforce heterogeneity. Today's labour force is getting more and more heterogeneous and ageing, migration, women's increased labour

participation and technological change are key drivers of this phenomenon (Kurtulus, 2012). Workforce diversity implies that organisations are becoming a more heterogeneous mix of individuals in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, ethnicity, and race. These dimensions of diversity are regarded as primary dimensions and they characterize heterogeneous organisations. Some writers like Arredondo (2004) included language, culture and social class in this dimension of diversity. Diversity, on the other hand, as defined by Loden and Rosener (1991) is that which differentiates one group of people from another along primary and secondary dimensions. Primary dimensions exert primary influences on our identities. They are not within the control of individuals but affect assumptions and expectations from others; have more impact on groups in the workplace and society; shape people's basic self-image as well as their fundamental world views (Kreitner, Kinicki & Buelens, 2002; Mazur, 2010). Secondary dimension which comprises educational background, family status, income, work experience, religion, geographical location are less visible and are a measure of an individual's self-worth. Arredondo (2004) identifies a tertiary dimension consisting of beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, assumptions, values, and group norms that lies far down from the surface and make up the core of individuals.

Diversity also recognizes similarities. Thomas (1996, p 5) defines it as "any mixture of items characterised by differences and similarities". In this vain, the Society for Human Resource Management (2009) defines diversity as the collective mixture of differences and similarities that includes for example, individual and organisational characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, preferences and behaviours. By interpretation, organisational workforce can be unique in certain aspects such areas as culture, age, religion etc and be different in others like: sex, educational background, class, etc.

Diversity yields dividends in an atmosphere void of prejudice where individuals are valued and respected in spite of their differences, where what makes them different are put to an advantageous use for the organization as well as for the individuals. Diversity, consequently, is far reaching and goes beyond mere acknowledgement and/or tolerance of differences. As the marketplace for goods and services becomes increasingly global, businesses must understand and embrace diversity in their brands as well as in their work forces. Simply having a diverse employee population is no longer enough (Ike & Eze, 2013), for a company to succeed in today's challenging economy, it must not only meet the needs of a multifaceted marketplace, it must respect different cultures, ideas and philosophies (Forbes, 2009).

Cultural Diversity in Nigeria

Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. It comprises elements of behaviour such as language,

religion, values, standards and customs that are shared by a group of people (Faranani, 2013). The culture of Nigeria (with a population of 167 million according to NPC August, 2012) is shaped by her multiple ethnic groups, which are over 500, each speaking its own language, although some may not necessarily speak the language identified with their ethnic groups. The ethnic, cultural and economic variations and long years of intermingling among the various groups have combined to produce very rich cultures and art forms which form the heritage of modern Nigeria (Nzemeke & Erhagbe, 1997).

A nation with diverse ethnic groups and thus cultural diversity would indubitably face difficulties in formulating, articulating and implementing strategies that would be acceptable to its vast constituency. That notwithstanding, development initiatives must pay serious attention to this issue because failure to address diversity can jeopardize such efforts (Mbakogu, 2002).

Cultural disharmony in Nigeria exists in form of tribalism, nepotism and has given rise to the constant struggle for the national cake. It is more of an issue of religious incompatibility with social consequences. Indeed, religion and ethnicity more than gender inequality separate people in Nigeria. The 2010s census of Association of Religion Data Archives reported that 46.5 percent of Nigerian total population is Christian, slightly bigger than the Muslim population of 45.5 percent, and that 7.7 percent are members of other religious groups. While Muslims can be found in all parts of Nigeria, they are most prevalent in the north of the country among the Hausas and Yorubas. Christianity, on the other hand is dominant in the south. Its adherents are mostly Igbos and Yorubas too. The lack of cultural integration hinges on the determination of faithfuls to protect, preserve and propagate their belief system at all costs and beyond existing boundaries. This constitutes the bane of our national development. The nation's constitution which should be an instrument of agreement and integration by its provisions has failed to create the anticipated ambiance of congeniality.

Cultural Diversity and the Nigerian Public Service

The search for an appropriate workforce has led to the recruitment of individuals from a wide spectrum of characteristics and cultural practices in many organisations in Nigeria, which as earlier discussed, is characterised by multiple diversities. Some organisations in Nigeria are multicultural especially federal public organisations where it is more noticeable because of the marked religious and ethnic integration that is not common elsewhere, whether at the private, state or local government levels. This cultural (religious and ethnic) integration is however, predominant in the former and present federal capital cities of Lagos and Abuja and perhaps few other workplaces with federal presence most likely. There is restricted mobility of labour in Nigeria due to religious differences, relatively high illiteracy rate in the North and gender stereotypes with particular reference to public organisations. Several individuals from the south

who work in the north do so on contract basis. Consequently, cultural diversity has remained a challenge for leadership at both governmental (the public service) and organisational levels in Nigeria because these spheres have failed to reflect the multiculturalism characterization for which the nation is generally known. Quite a number of organisations do not have a workforce that is truly multicultural. This situation is evidenced by the report from a global diversity and inclusion survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management/The Economist Intelligence Unit where Nigeria scored 31.3/100 (45th out of 47 countries) on the global diversity readiness index (SHRM, 2009).

Generally, there is virtually no literature in existence on how diversity affects the Nigerian Public Service. Confirming this view, Olanrewaju (1994); Hammour (1994:80-87) as cited by Balogun (2001) state that to date, we know very little about the impact of diversity in public sector organisations. Our limited knowledge of the conditions prevailing in public sector bodies – based on anecdotal evidence and fragmented pieces of information obtained from visits to a number of organisations in Sub Saharan African countries - suggests that these organisations are a beehive of activity, largely, conflict-related and unproductive activity. While experiences vary, one gets an impression of organisations in which individuals and groups battle for supremacy. In-depth investigations are likely to reveal that the battles are more over *who wins* than *what gets accomplished*, that is, over whose group controls the key offices rather than how to serve the citizen better. In such circumstances, enemies are manufactured, alliances are formed, while substantive programmes are left by the way side. In the absence of concrete empirical evidence, we shall never have precise knowledge of the impact. All the same, it is not unlikely that this kind of diversity management explains the non-performance of public sector entities.

Every government of Nigeria is expected to demonstrate a commitment to fairness in all its dealings and with particular regard to appointments of persons into national positions/offices to ensure that the national workforce in ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) is representative of Nigerian's diversity and demographic profile. To this end, the Federal Character Commission was established to be the watchdog of MDAs in ensuring an evenly distributed workforce that reflects ethnic diversity and the geopolitical divides of the country besides making sure that social-economic amenities; and infrastructural facilities among the federating units of the nation are equitably distributed. The reality on ground is that this expectation of ensuring equitable distribution of bureaucratic, civil and public posts is seldom met.

Workforce diversity is yet to emerge on the radar screen of many HR practitioners and business leaders in Nigeria (particularly in the private sector). Many follow the convenient path of avoiding or ignoring the potentially contentious and emotive issues relating to diversity, adopting an informal approach to diversity management (Adeleye, Aja-Nwachukwu & Fawehinmi, 2012).

In this sector, the private corporations, where corporate executives have a free rein for diversity management, diversity issues are really not a major concern except in multinational corporations with particular reference to the oil and gas sector, where cultural diversity takes on an international dimension and new challenges to realise similarities and differences between employees with dissimilar cultural backgrounds have emerged (Smith, Peterson and Schwartz, 2002). In these corporations diversity is regarded as one of organisations' core values. This is in line with the views of Wambui, Wangombe, Muthura, Kamau and Jackson, (2013) that diversity is not an initiative or a project but it is an ongoing core aim and a core process.

Workforce Diversity in relation to Culture and Performance

A broader definition makes use of additional categories such as teaching, education, sexual orientation and differences in values, abilities, organisational function, tenure and personality. Taking a broader view, diversity management initiatives attempt to maximize the potential of all employees in direct benefit to the organisation, Cole and Kelly (2011).

Diversity management determines not only the effects of the diversity within an organisation but also the level of openness to dissimilarity characteristics among the organisation's members, work groups, and culture, Patrick (2010). Diversity is not just a racially contentious issue but one of culture too. Understanding the cultural organisations of any country would affect the ways the diverse workforces operate (Nwadike, 2011). Therefore, cultural diversity, within the context of this write up focuses on conduct and behaviours of individuals in the public service who come from different ethnic backgrounds, of different languages as well as have varying religious beliefs. The linguistic and cultural identity constitutes the core of the cultures of most ethnic groups, absence or denial of these linguistic and cultural rights could promote conflict and violence (Jerman (1998) citing Skutnabb, Kangas & Phillipson (1994). Such ethnic groups in Nigeria include Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Isoko and Urhobo as well as other minorities with different backgrounds.

In a nut shell we can say that managing diversity has to do with maximizing diversity's potential benefits for instance, greater cultural awareness and broader language skills while at the same time minimizing the potential barriers such as prejudices and bias that can undermine the company's performance (O'Leary & Weathington, 2006) cited in Dessler (2011).

However, several researchers have opined that how organisations approach DM can have significant implications for whether the organisation is helped or harmed by its diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Diversity within an organisation according to Dahm (2003) can invoke an array of emotions. Some researchers view diversity as a menace that requires hard measures of management. Ugwuzor, (2014) citing Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, (2003) and Webber & Donahue (2001) states that research shows that various types of team and organisational diversity sometimes increase conflict, reduce social cohesion, and increase employee turnover. Some

researchers, on the other hand, believe that workforce diversity possesses potentials for enhancing performance. According to Ozbilgin and Tatli (2008) there is a strong empirical confirmation that successful diversity management and a resulting improvement in organisational performance are positively correlated and that diversity has enhanced performance by broadening the group's perspectives. Some studies have found that various forms of diversity are associated with greater innovation, improved strategic decision making, and organisational performance. Ethnic diversity would benefit team performance due to a more diverse pool of skills and knowledge that leads to complementary and mutual learning.

On performance in the Nigerian Public Service, Balogun (2001) asked a pertinent question: what is the justification for the increasing interest in inclusiveness, and how does this shift in thinking affect the performance of organisations in the public domain? In other words, will the diversity (which comes with inclusiveness) enhance the public bureaucracy's role as an "engine" of growth, or push the bureaucracy further in the path of disintegration and decay? As part of the answer to this question, he observes that when diversity is discussed within the context of public sector organisations, the analyst is compelled to trace the link to the phobias and insecurities that are now so characteristic of intra-organisational relations as to be deemed mutually inter-changeable. For example, the novel recruitment practices adopted in the wake of the enactment of inclusive policies tend to fan real or imagined fears – among them, of undue favouritism, of unwarranted exclusion, of reverse discrimination, of cultural or group "contamination" and of alienation. Diversity, in this context, has been adjudged to be the bane of the public service and by extension, Nigeria's economic existence. If diversity as a phenomenon has had the same consequences in all the countries where it occurs, then, it would have been right to conclude that the concept in itself is negative with no positive outcomes. But as we find with some countries, the United States in particular, diversity has yielded dividends that have helped to shape countries into powerful entities. So much so that diversity has not only been embraced but also pursued. Lack of performance in the culturally diverse public service could be attributed to the inability of all connected to its wellbeing to manage its inherent diversity status and attendant conflicts. Balogun (2001) puts it rather directly when he stated that the root of the public sector's abysmal performance is the lack of consensus on the building blocks of a collective political culture as well as on the essential ingredients of a goal-focused, co-operative and functional system of administration. The challenge facing the public sector, he concluded, is primarily that of diversity management.

Managing Diversity in the People Management Context in the Public Service

Diversity management refers to at least three disciplines: human resources management, work law, marketing and change management, which mutually derive from their work. However, data collected from global surveys during ongoing downturn show that it is first closely related to

strategic management (Minchington, 2013, pp. 2–3). The key to diversity management hinges on strategic thinking and people-centred policies. While diversity management is an approach that revolves around employees, the HRM function is the custodian of the people management processes. These functions have considerable overlap (Shen, Chanda, D'Netto, & Monga, 2009).

Some key global trends that compel companies to think about diversity management are: 1) necessity of changes; 2) demographic trends causing workforce structure transformation; 3) globalization; 4) hard competitiveness; 5) demand for business transparency and fairness (Matuska & Sałek–Imińska, 2004). Diversity creates behavioral challenges in the workforce which affect interactions among employees and groups and ultimately the organization's performance. The people, culture, communication are key areas of attention for managers.

Diversity management is a change strategy that addresses a shift in existing demographics, in an attempt to restore balance in the organization. It portends a set of challenges to the manager ranging from perceived unfairness, intergroup/interpersonal conflicts, workforce environmental changes to a probable loss of identity. As a driver of change, the manager must provide the right leadership necessary to stir the organization along the course of progress. This implies that the manager/leader should be trained to acquire the necessary skills to be a successful change agent because leadership according to Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006) is the process of motivating people to change and the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.

In the Nigerian context, where there is an array of cultural differences, the term "detribalized leader" has arisen, connoting a leader whose leadership style does not smack of ethnic bias; whose discharge of responsibilities is not influenced by ethnic affiliation/consideration but rather merit. The leader's major challenge in a public service setting is building an inclusive management system that would assimilate employees from minority groups or outside the dominant group. This confirms Falola and Heaton's (2008) assertion that the dominant approach to managing diversity in Nigeria is the assimilation paradigm with focus on anti discriminatory practices and fairness. The argument against this approach is that assimilated people are often denied the opportunities to be themselves having been mentored and coached to adopt the necessary traits for inclusion into the privileged group as opposed to being embraced for their differences. This may eventually decrease organizational performance.

Central to the issue of diversity in the Nigerian Public Service is integration, a precursor to development, which the federal character provision has not been able to adequately address. The public service with its pool of culturally diverse workforce provides a good starting point for diversity initiatives. As a federal state faced with the challenge of imbibing the principle of federalism in practice, Nigeria adopted the quota system and introduced it into the public service in 1958 to ensure equitable representation of the various ethnic groups in the Nigeria's public service.

The reference to the phrase 'disadvantaged groups' according to Gboyega, (1989) is that special consideration should be given to candidates from the Northern provinces and other areas where educational facilities were more backward than elsewhere. In this regard, quota system and federal character principle have been viewed to lead to a sense of entitlement in beneficiaries and resentment in others (Murray-Bruce, 2015 in Odu, 2015). In the same vein, Akuta (2009) asserts that quota system encourages tribalism and division. If this stands true for the Nigerian situation, then the federal character principle is fostering what it was originally meant to hinder: crises resulting from inequality and marginalization.

The federal character principle approach to ethnic diversity issue in Nigeria has been attacked and blamed for the low performance in the public service as it undermines the importance of merit, an essential administrative ethical requirement of any functional system. It fails to consider qualification, skills, training and experience for job appointments leading to the creation of systems that right from the outset are bound to fail. This according to Akuta (2009) is contrary to what Max Weber (1864-1920) said, that employees should be hired and promoted based on merit and expertise.

The challenge facing the public sector is basically that of diversity management which must be addressed both at the governance and managerial levels. Diversity management is a complex process that requires the application of a leadership style that recognizes the instability and unpredictability peculiarities of a diverse workforce. One such theory, the complexity leadership theory, finds relevance here.

These three leadership roles represent the necessary and inevitable interaction between an organisation's bureaucratic, administrative functions and its emergent, informal CAS dynamics (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). This relatively new theory recognizes that adaptive change and learning result from the collective action response of agents who are interdependently interacting at the nexus of diverse knowledge. It further recognizes that while organisations need to stimulate emergent collective action, they also have a bureaucratic nature and a need to efficiently control organisational outcomes for exploitation. This is known as the organisational design paradox (Child and McGrath, 2001). Complexity leadership theory focuses on enabling leadership and adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership occurs within the complex functioning process. Adaptive leaders are those who are particularly influential in facilitating interactions and knowledge flows. Enabling leadership aims to foster tension. Heterogeneity (differences in skills, preferences, and perspectives among agents) can enhance internal tension by stimulating interdependency.

In the upper organisational levels, enabling leadership can foster heterogeneity by creating an organisational norm of respecting diversity and tolerating divergent perspectives on problems, and by structuring work groups that will interact with diverse ideas (Uhl-Bien *et al*., 2007).

Among employees a high tension evolves and they try to organize themselves into certain groups, perceived as a positive prerequisite for becoming a self-organisation. New interrelations and connections help the organisation to change from old to entirely new patterns, to establish new work procedures, and to foster integration (Lauser, 2010). According to Balogun (2001), this underscores the point made earlier about the need for individuals to step out of their boxes once in a while so they could see the world in a new light. It also highlights the need for those in key policy and management positions to create an environment that is conducive to dialogue and communication – in other words, open environments in which a steady flow of information disperses rumours before they being to germinate. This is when a platform for new opportunities, i.e., *space-of-new-possibilities* is being created. Promoting a self-organisation, exploration of these new opportunities and possibilities is key to creativity and innovations. It is also a prerequisite to *co-evolutionary integration*, when partners influence each other in a reciprocal way and find the best way to work together (Mitleton-Kelly, 2006). Therefore, communication, meetings and workshops are key, in order to build up a new network within the new environment (Lauser & Peters, 2008).

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