

CORE

SUSTAINING HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: THE INFLUENCE OF EXPATRIATES

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Not long after arriving in Africa I was fortunate to land a 30 day training contract with a large organisation. Despite having a sizeable training staff, the training manager warned me of their inability. After a few days I developed a much more positive impression of the training centre staff, who were all Africans. Despite my efforts to point out their various merits, the training manager retained his dismissive perspective, recounting various tales of African management disasters. He, like myself, was an expatriate. After meeting more expatriate managers, I realised that this first encounter with an expatriate manager was, unfortunately, not going to be an exception.

In this article I examine some of the factors which may contribute to the sceptical and pessimistic attitudes which some expatriate managers appear to have concerning the ability and performance of African managers. Such attitudes threaten the sustainability of many of the projects which expatriate managers or consultants have been contracted to set up. At a time of struggling African economies, rising debt and increasing difficulties with sustaining development projects (Bossert, 1990), it is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of Human Resource Development (HRD) programmes. Without investing in and developing 'African' managers' ability to manage African problems, the continent will remain dependent on increasingly undependable aid.

The Pygmalion Effect

In *Managing Cultural Differences*, Harris and Moran (1989) write:

... manager's awareness of Africa is not of the diversity and generosity of its people, their eagerness to learn and their hardworking ways; nor of the continent's immense resources and natural beauty. Instead, mass media captivate us with horror stories of famine, struggles with apartheid, unrest and corruption.

The 'Pygmalion Effect' refers to the likelihood that a teacher's expectations of a pupil's performance will shape the pupil's behaviour to coincide with the teacher's expectations.

If teacher believes that Jimmy is a poor pupil, then teacher will behave toward Jimmy as if he is a poor pupil. Jimmy will realise that little is expected of him and will, therefore, put little effort into his work. The teacher will have been correct: Jimmy is a poor pupil. The idea that we see what we expect to see, is common in social psychological theories of stereotyping (Reich and Adcock, 1976), which may account for the prejudices which one group holds about another.

When cultural differences between expatriates and Africans are superimposed on the teacher-pupil (or trainer-trainee) relationship it is likely to heighten the Pygmalion Effect. This is because, coming from a different culture, expatriates' ideas of 'good performance' are likely to differ, in at least some respects, from indigenous beliefs. It is often patronisingly assumed that where differences exist, Western values are in some way superior to those held by Africans. Thus it is important not only to be sensitive to the value of different cultural perspectives, but also to appreciate that the variety of cultures found in Africa is at least as diverse and as rich as that found in Europe. Unless this differentiation is made, Western stereotypes of African behaviour will further distort the relationship between expatriates and their local colleagues.

In the conclusion to their book on *Doing Business in Developing Countries*, Cavusgil and Ghauri (1990) state:

. . . the Western business person must develop certain personal skills. These include cross-cultural sensitivity, empathy, tolerance, and flexibility. Among these personal traits, avoiding the 'self-reference criterion', our unconscious reference to our own way of doing things is key. We often accept our own culture and its ways as the norm and tend to judge others by our own standards.

Such egocentrism threatens the sustainability of HRD in Africa. Development programmes must reflect the particular needs of the countries in which the programmes are located, rather than reflecting the concerns of foreigners.

The Appropriateness of Western HRD Models to African Countries

I do not want to overstate the importance of cultural sensitivity. A country's inherited culture is not a fragile historic artifact, but a dynamic current synthesis of differing influences over the ages. Few societies evolve in a vacuum.

When judging the appropriateness of a model, the yardstick should not be its cultural sensitivity as such, but rather, its effectiveness in practice. Effectiveness in practice will be determined by many factors, including the extent to which a model takes advantage of indigenous work styles and beliefs. Writing in the early '80s Naymark (1983) noted that despite large scale importation of production and training models from the West, developing countries failed to produce the same sort of advances as might have been expected from more industrialised countries.

Many aspects of Western life are still revered in Africa. The fruits of 'Western'

achievements are understandably pursued by applying the same methods that have been shown to work so well in the West. Thus the expatriate consultant is flown into Lagos 'to do his stuff' which was so effective in increasing managerial efficiency in the UK. What he or she fails to appreciate is that, for the middle manager in Nigeria, a course on 'Effective Decision Making' is next to useless, as top management in Nigeria rarely, if ever, devolves authority. As the middle managers cannot put into practice what is being taught they appear apathetic and lacking motivation. The expatriate consultant flies off with more stories of African inadequacy to feed into the 'Pygmalion Roundabout'. Consequently, expatriates become increasingly cynical about the ability of Africans to progress in terms of HRD.

Self-Development

One of the recent thrusts of American HRD has been the increasing emphasis given to self-development. The American manager, by understanding him- or herself, can 'fine tune' personal thinking and performance, in order to become a more effective 'tool' in achieving the overall aims of the organisation. He or she is also encouraged to 'develop' the self, in order to become a 'better person'. Western models of self-development endorse strongly the idea of *individualism*. But the extent to which individualism is valued by a culture varies. In countries such as the United States of America, great emphasis is put on individual performance, individual initiative, individual achievement and measurement of the individual (Hofstede, 1980). However in the cultures of many African countries, *collectivism* – a concern with the welfare of the group and the equal distribution of resources – is more highly valued than it is in Western cultures (Segall et al., 1990).

This might suggest that, in at least some parts of Africa, a relatively greater emphasis on team and community development, as compared to self-development, would be more effective in producing the desired goal of better performance. As such, some aspects of Eastern managerial practices, with their greater emphasis on collectivism, should be considered (Pascale and Athos, 1982).

Contextual Analysis

Time Management is one example of an obvious difference in cultural perspectives between Africa and the West. Western beliefs in the advantages of good time management must take into account Africans' altogether different experience of time, which has been described as 'timeless'! Teaching pedantic time diary techniques in Dar es Salaam is likely to go down like a lead balloon. This is because, in Dar es Salaam, managers cannot rely on transport or communications to the same extent as most managers in Western countries. In HRD nothing fails like failure. What is needed, then, is not the application of Western methods to achieve Western levels of success, but instead to recognise that African countries each present their own and unique set of problems. We should however aspire to the same degree of success in solving those problems.

Just as solutions have been found to management problems in Germany, France or Britain, by examining their full context, so too must the full contextual restraints and facilitators be considered, when tackling problems which arise in different African countries. Thus, expatriate managers and consultants should seek to transfer the knowledge of systems that have allowed them to identify solutions to problems, rather than impose Western solutions, which may well be the right answer, but to the wrong problem. The African manager has the more difficult task of using his indigenous knowledge to derive an African solution to an African problem, based on a knowledge system which has been useful elsewhere. This makes the expatriate manager dependent on the African manager, in contrast to the prevailing ethos in many African countries.

Training the Trainers

Present methods of training HRD trainers represent another serious threat to the sustainability of HRD programmes in Africa. Those selected to be trainers are often armed with Western MBAs and training diplomas which are designed for 'another world'. But it is difficult to expect trainers not to teach what they themselves have been taught, as 'state of the art' practice. If they were not to teach what they have learnt, what is the point of them getting the qualification in the first place?

However, African students in Britain are not taught how to translate the principles of Western achievement into the practicals of African training and development. The reason for this is that few, if any, Western institutions actually know how to achieve this *translation* of successful Western methods into African contexts. This is surely an area of development for the '90s. Recently some foreign aid donors have shifted fellowship funding to in-country education and institution building (Roberts, 1990) as the inappropriateness of some Western education programmes is increasingly recognised throughout Africa.

Another factor which is likely to make HRD difficult to sustain in Africa is the Western-educated African 'brain drain'. As HRD professionals are frustrated by their failure to apply successfully what they have been taught, it becomes increasingly attractive to apply their knowledge in a more receptive context. The West not only supplies their 'natural' students but also considerably larger financial incentives. It is ironic that some Africans, who go to work in the West, augment the Pygmalion Effect by telling Western HRD professionals about the difficulties of putting HRD into practice in Africa. Their experience of failing to successfully apply HRD in their own country has led them to dismiss the ideas of HRD in Africa, rather than to search for different techniques of application.

Research and Development

In order that African HRD be sustained, it must be effective. This means

understanding the context in which problems present. Short cuts from Western methods risk short-circuiting HRD initiatives. What is needed is a greater understanding of how managers in different African countries presently operate, the restrictions placed upon them and the opportunities afforded them. Montgomery (1987) describes a study of managers within the SADCC (Southern African Development Coordination Conference) region which indicated distinctly African concerns with HRD. The factors noted included favouring collectivism over individualism, focusing on internal resource linked issues at the expense of policy issues, and avoiding change and innovation.

Africa presents a plethora of cultural diversity which will not respond to a 'broad brush' approach. Expatriate consultants and managers should see their role as collaborators in the *exploration* for answers to so-called 'African' problems rather than the purveyors of well-trying and proven Western remedies. Without this change in emphasis the possibility of HRD proving its worth in Africa seems remote. If HRD is not seen to be effective, it will not be judged worthy of receiving the scarce resources which are required to sustain it.

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