

IMPROVING PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IN THE NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *From the outset, this paper argues that at the local government level, personnel management has not received the needed professional attention at least in practice. Consequently, national development suffers from the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the manpower that is supposed to initiate and sustain it from the grassroots. The significance of personnel is then highlighted, with management and development as theoretical basis. The Local Government personnel management organisation and functions were analysed along the line, using problem - solution approach. In further search for improvements, the paper proposes rigorous reflection on pre-colonial personnel management theory and practice. It wondered at the relative effectiveness and efficiency in the accomplishment of development projects that characterised the pre-colonial peoples that made the present day Nigerian nation. The paper therefore sought to provide a sound theoretical foundation that informed the relationship between personnel management in the local government system and national development, with the hope of presenting empirical quantitative data and analysis to support the main thesis in the near future.*

KEYWORDS: Local Government, National Development, Nigeria, Personnel management

INTRODUCTION

For many years, manpower, being the most strategic and potent resource in any organisation, has not received the desired professional management for the attainment of local governments' contributions towards national development. Consequently, lack of performance on the part of local government personnel often results in moribund national development. That is why the role of local government in national development has always been a question of argument and general discussion. The issue becomes worse when problems of development are traced to lack of managerial ability manifested in the inability to plan and execute government programmes as well as efficient and effective social service delivery.

Therefore, for development to be possible, there is the need for the emergence of a sound manpower management programme within which adequate, skilled and well-motivated workforce should operate. No local government can be efficient and effective if it underrates the critical role that people play in achieving goals.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

According to Dessler (2000:2), there seems to be an agreement among most experts, that there are at least five major functions performed by all managers namely, planning, organising, staffing, leading and controlling. In total, these functions represent the management process. But a Likert (in Pigors and Myers, 1983:35) "...of all the tasks of management, managing the human component is the central and most important task, because all else depend on how well it is done." This manifests itself particularly when it is appreciated that for management to emerge in any organisation there must be action and interaction. This also supports the fact that it is not possible for any definition of management to escape inherent human component. For, instance, according to Udom (1998:1) "...management is the art of managing the activities of other people-men and women"

Personnel management on the other hand, according to Agbato (1990:113), is the process of attracting, holding and motivating people. Thus, personnel management can be defined as a process of obtaining and intaining satisfied manpower capable of full utilisation at work with adequate retirement and separation plans. The process should not only be geared to individual and local government development but the nation at large.

Notwithstanding the fact that development is a complex and complicated term with many and varied meanings as there are scholars, it is our view that, what appears to be the driving force behind the movements for the creation of many local government areas in Nigeria is the belief that the mere creation of many local government area will bring "grassroots development." This belief was engineered, propagated and instilled in the masses by the ruling elite in order to ensure continuous flow of avenues of amassing the wealth of the nation and to perpetuate their dominance. This is evidently clear with the experiences and happenings in the local government system in Nigeria. Hence that belief is rendered rather naïve, because development should be people centred and not necessarily institution – centred. As Seers (1969:2) rightly argues:

Development is inevitably a normative term and we must ask ourselves what are the necessary conditions for a universally acceptable aim-the realisation of the potential of human personality.

Therefore, whatever development is, it has to do with the improvement in the standard of living of the whole population. That is why Seers (1969) rejected per-capita income as the only means of measuring development. He prefers to provide a clue about what to look for in a country's development.

What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse,

especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result “development” even if per capital income doubled. (Seers: ibid)

From the foregoing, let's now adopt that national development is a progressive process within appropriate policies and implementation procedures towards reduction in poverty, unemployment and inequality.

PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM.

Personnel management functions at the local government level can also be performed in at least two different locations. The first is the Local Government Service Commission. Among others, it has the power to appoint, post, promote and discipline local government employees.

In theory, the objective of having such an arrangement sounds ideal. But if it comes to practice, a lot of problems arise. It should however be noted that, the Local Government Service Commission has an almost unlimited authority in the areas mentioned above, with a kind of delegation of such to Junior Staff Management Committee. Therefore, it is a function that can be conveniently performed at the Local Government level of the organisation; just like personnel department in a company manned by professional human resource managers. This can ensure maximum utilisation of the available manpower, as well as enhancing the autonomous status of local governments. It is important because there is no gain – saying the fact that in the operation of Local Government Service Commission, there is no actual politics elimination in the discharge of its responsibilities. The recent decisions that officers should serve in their Local Governments of origin is more informed by politics rather than merit.

The same arrangement also added to the mistrust and discord within the local governments themselves, as a result of rendering personnel management departments as secondary in the scheme of things. As Adedeji (1995:125) rightly observes,

The personnel department, most often invades or appears to ‘invade’ the jealously protected territories of other departments, when it seeks information and tends to influence decisions of other departments in matters of recruitment, promotion, transfer, retrenchments and discipline. It occurs strained relations with those who consider such conducts as nose-poking.

This does not augur well for the desired cooperation of all people towards the attainment of common organisational goals. It should be noted, however, that it is not the actual organisational arrangement that is at fault but its operators, since it works successfully somewhere else. According to Odumosu (In Nnebe 1997:28) “It is often maintained that the root of performance problem is not organisational structure nor even finance, but personnel, particularly at the top and upper middle levels of management”. To improve the situation, the mutual trust and respect known with our pre-colonial systems should have been adopted as

the most important consideration, instead of organisational structure. Furthermore, there is the need for related and relevant research into personnel management theory and practice in the pre-colonial period to unearth the cherish able things like real sense of service to the community found in various age grade systems and cooperative farming. In order to adopt with some relevant modern practices to produce a blend of local government service that suits our local environments towards national development. Some reflections on Sokoto Caliphate may help matters. Tijani (1979:270) cited a case between sultan Aliyu Babba and the Sokoto Ulama thus.

... Aliyu's conduct displeased the Ulamas at Sokoto. They objected to the fact that he abandoned Sokoto and established his residence in Wurno. He had neglected repairs to the mosque in Sokoto, and had refused to distribute state revenue as sadaka (alms) in the ways established by Islamic tradition and actual practices of his predecessors. In view of such serious dereliction of duties and responsibilities...Six leading Ulamas "who had fought for the Shehu during the jihad publicity announced that they had withdrawn their allegiance from Aliyu, and that if was halal (permissible) for others to do likewise.

Several personnel management issues like leading, accountability, and grievance management can be identified from above. The other interesting part of it was that when Aliyu convincingly defended himself and agreed improvements on the situation, according to Tijani (1979:271) the Ulamas agreed that the Caliph had acquitted himself of their charges and renewed their allegiance. It is this kind of effective and continuous checks in the form of allegiance that are needed on our local government chairman and not necessarily long and cumbersome impeachment procedures. This will go to a large extent in reducing the accusations and counter accusations on local government personnel for lack of accountability and rampant corruption to the extent of causing unnecessary frequent local government reforms that had not yet moulded the local government service to contribute positively to national development.

In the same vein, it is acceptable to a fair degree that nowadays the local government service commission, has receives a reasonably adequate funds, but efficient management capable of producing development oriented staff is lacking. As Orewa (1983:269) would argue, "however whatever the form of the administration of services at the local level there can be no substitute for efficient management which can only be achieved by high calibre staff"

One wonders why for many years such "high calibre staff" is lacking in the local government system. It is insistence on a system that is not local, but colonial creation, which dislocates, strangulates, and retards the development of the traditional personnel management system; a situation which neither the colonial government nor the so-called independent government has tried to reverse. Instead, the subsequent regimes imitated other systems through various forms of reform, which contributed to deteriorating professionalism. Above all, the ruling elites are not willing to practise the entrenched system very well.

PERSONNEL FUNCTIONS

Before delving into the discussions of some personnel functions, it is important to highlight its interconnectedness with the functions of local government in the process of national development. According to Otaigbe (2002:34) "...the local government councils have a number of functions to perform within their area of jurisdiction. It ranges from economic to social functions. Performing these functions in themselves can be employment generating". But unfortunately most local government are lagging behind in performing their functions. Because employees are not always getting the desired professional personnel management to effectively utilise them. Perhaps, as a result of dual loyalty this does not favour effective supervision. It is the responsibility of well-managed personnel to perform these functions. To Orewa and Adewumi (1983:251) "the need for high-level manpower at the local level cannot be divorced from other factors of local government such as finance and functions, which invariably dictate the level of staff at any local authority". Furthermore, Otaigbe (2002:35) argues.

How effectively the revenue is generated will depend on the attitude of the people and procedures adopted by government to generate and collect the funds. A government that collects revenue from the people it governs must be prepared to carry the people along in all its policies; it must be prepared to invest in development projects that serve the social needs of the people as well as generating the funds to sustain their needs reduce poverty among them.

The issues raised were that personnel permeate all activities of development process. Hence if it is well managed it can act as partner in progress or otherwise sabotage development. We now proceed to discuss the main personnel functions.

Manpower Planning

This is the process of anticipating and providing future manpower requirements of an organisation. There are many approaches to manpower planning ranging from the complex to the simple. The interrelated activities that constitute manpower planning system include: personnel inventory, manpower forecast and adjustments to their outcome i.e. handling understaffing or overstaffing,

Thus, whether the local government system obtains its staff through local Government Service Commission or Junior Staff Management Committee, Manpower Planning should be the basis of obtaining a satisfactory workforce. This is important because without it all efforts of securing staff would be aimless; and it tantamount to waste of resources and consequently low productivity as a result of low morale.

Manpower Recruitment

What follows after forecasting the manpower needs of an organisation is the filling of available job positions. Based on the number of people required according to job

specification and description, "In its conceptual and restricted sense, however, recruitment is that process which starts from getting an applicant interested enough in a job and in a particular organisation to write an application and the process stops when his application has been received in the organisation" (Omale 1992:47). But this is not necessarily the case with the local government system. It may go beyond what it is ideally supposed to be. As Abbas (1991:7) rightly puts it, "in most cases, the recruitment of employees into the local government service is based on patronage. Thus, only persons with necessary 'connections' in one way or the other are favoured" May be that explain the idea of heavy emphasis on internal sources of recruitment as against external sources. Although internal source is all right, it should not be utilised at the expense of external means, which has the advantage of exposing the system to healthy competition. Giving chance to more deserving applicants can spread the feeling of employment generation. It will also reduce the indiscipline that may be generated as a result of misuse of patronage system by subordinates.

Selection and Placement

After recruitment, then selection follows. It is a process of finding the person or persons that are successful from the various selection techniques, such as interview or examination, to match the job openings in an organisation. However, because it is provided that "in carrying out recruitment into the local government service, the local government and the local government service commission shall take full account of the geographical spread and socio-economic diversities of the local government area" (Oyelaki, 1992:12), it is hardly difficult to rid selection exercise in the local government system from primordial considerations, such as family, religion, place of origin etc. All at the expense of best and more qualified applicants. This kind of approach should be discontinued and out-rooted in all its ramifications, in order to have the right calibre personnel to manage the process of national development.

Scheme of Service

In the pre-1988 approved scheme of service for local government employees in Nigeria, it is acceptable that, perhaps the personnel of local government service are considered to be 'local' and that is why payment for services rendered was not commensurate with that of the state or federal workers. Going by their actual earnings, they can be termed as underpaid workers, and if that is so, how can they be expected to contribute as partners in national development? But is that really the case? Because there is remarkable improvement in local government scheme of service and remuneration with the advent of approved scheme of service for local government employees and subsequent salary increases extended to them. However, comparable contribution to national development is still proving to be a predicament. The situation would have been different if other consideration, rather than wage increase, are emphasised, just like in the early pre-colonial days when according to Ananaba (1969:1), custom had established the practice that people should serve their parents, family and village heads, and the community without remuneration. Peasant Farming which was the main occupation of the people was carried out on a cooperative basis. The basic idea is to blend this sense of community service with modern remuneration system. Where the

emphasis is not what amount of remuneration can be earned but what benefit is derivable in cooperation with others in terms of betterment of life at local level.

Training and Development

According to Cascio (1989:235), “traditionally, lower-level employees were ‘trained while high level employees were ‘developed’. This distinction, focusing on the learning of hands on skills versus interpersonal and decision making skills have become too blurry in practice to be useful”. Therefore, it is not surprising to find the two concepts used interchangeably. They are activities designed to facilitate learning in organisation. They range from actions and events to episodes in which personnel engage in order to improve performance in specific job-related task. Therefore, they are related to skill development, attitude modification etc necessary for the growth and development of the organisation. Unfortunately, training and development in the Local Government system are not adequately handled in their conceptual ideals. Many a time, methods rather than objectives are emphasised.

Neither the Local Government Service Commission nor the junior staffs Management Committee has adequately assisted towards improving the qualities of local government employees. This is despite all the huge amounts spent on training activities. The issue is that beneficiaries of Seminars or workshops are only after registration fees, bags and memos to ensure formal registration, but not the actual gains of the exercise. On the part of consultants, who are the usual agencies that organise training activities, perhaps because they consider the participants as ‘local people’ it is not uncommon to find sub-standard, and to a certain extent, irrelevant materials presented. This is possible largely due to the absence of at least constructive criticisms or challenges from the audience, who may at times disappear after registration, perhaps as a result of irrelevance to ones field or as a sign of protest against substandard presentation.

Training and Development are very significant to the survival of any organisation. Therefore, there is the need for local government employees to precisely know what they are expected to arrive at and should be constantly remind about this through training and development. Nnebe (1997:29) opines that.

Training must be methodical and systematic. Many organisations embark upon training programmes without targeting them to any organisational and individual needs. Training carried out in this matter is wasteful and at the end nothing worthwhile is achieved.

Performance Appraisal

According to Ojofeitimi (1992:82), “appraisal schemes are...means of rewarding, criticising, encouraging and counselling. The superior of the person appraised is meant to be both a judge and counsellor, but, in practice, these twin roles tend to be incompatible.” However, in the local government system even though the Handbook on local government administration provides that rewards and sanctions should be based on concrete measureable performance

(Oyelakin, 1992:14), in practice it is not the question of incompatibility between judgement and counselling. However, it is sometimes used as a means of threat for denial of rewards as a result of interpersonal conflicts.

The worst part of it is that those appraisals are usually used for the purpose of promotion and nothing else. Moreso, blanket forms are used for all professions.

For an appraisal to be effective, it has to be relevant to performance standards. It also has to be capable of distinguishing between effective and ineffective performers. Ratings should be objective and raters should avoid bias and prejudice. An appraisal should also contain inherent consistency of judgement. It should also be based on practical experiences and finally, it should be acceptable as a result of relative confidence in its conduct.

Staff welfare

Welfare scheme is a form of extra security and comfort provided to individual workers. It helps in establishing a cordial relationship between the individuals and the organisation. It is very important towards the attainment of the goals of an organisation. For instance, “people possess superior skills, competence or intelligence. They may be willing and burning with zeal, but except the environment is conducive, the best in them cannot flourish (Nnebe, 1997:28). Therefore, in order to boost morale of local government employees, each local government should evolve appropriate staff welfare schemes, such as housing, recreation, canteen, medical treatment etc.

CONCLUSION

Organisational arrangement for the conduct of personnel management functions in Nigeria’s local government system is not really in favour of professionalism. The composition of both Local Government Service Commission and Junior Staff Management Committee left much to be desired in this respect. The system therefore became more prone to the dangers of killing real initiative that can emerge from the local level, to suit the process of development.

This paper agrees that when our pre-colonial personnel management imperatives are carefully well researched, the same spirit that inspired and held people together can be found and applied for the benefit of the nation. The emphasis therefore is to allow professionalism to emerge from within the local system and not try to enforce foreign system in the form of uniformity. Local government areas are small organisations and not all that complex and difficult to manage. Indeed, it has not yet developed the constraints of large-scale bureaucratic organisations. It only needs to be allowed to evolve personnel management styles that suit its socio-cultural environment.

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