Staff Indiscipline and Productivity in the Public Sector in Nigeria (Pp. 461-471)

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Abstract
The existence of various acts of indiscipline in public sector in Nigeria is a source of concern to people (managers, bureaucrats, top public/civil servants and other patriotic Nigerians). The reason is that they see such negative/ deviant behaviour, which include habitual lateness to work, loafing, buck-passing, bribery, corruption, embezzlement or misappropriation of public funds, misuse of government property as counter-productive and therefore detrimental to the accomplishment of organizational goals. This paper perceives such acts of indiscipline as the reasons for low productivity in the public sector and argues that they are curtail-able. It goes further to discuss the factors responsible of such official acts of indiscipline which characterize contemporary public organizations in Nigeria. The paper recommends that to overcome the problem of indiscipline and low productivity in the public sector, there is the need for the three tiers of government to regularize the payment of workers' salaries and wages to increase their productivity. Furthermore, the current efforts of the Federal Government in fighting corruption should be sustained.

Introduction

One of the major problems facing managers, whether in public or private organizations, is how to manage the personnel under them. This is particularly important because the level of indiscipline in the public sector organizations in Nigeria is found to be responsible for low productivity in government's desire to achieve higher living standard for the people (Adebayo, 2001). Batty (1974) argued that effective management of organizational workforce is possible only if managers adopts the correct approach to motivation, the giving of instructions and where necessary, discipline, and this requires high level of co-operation from the workforce. Effective discipline depends not only on sound leadership and a good personnel policy but also on the full co-operation of employees to such policies of the organization.

The Concept of Discipline

Discipline, according to McFarland (1979), refers to conditions of orderliness in which members of an organization conduct themselves with respect of the needs and desires of the organization, subordinating to some extent their own needs and desires. We see discipline as concern with the imposition of certain restrictions on the behaviour of members (employees) of an organization.

There are two basic forms of discipline, namely, positive or constructive discipline on the one hand and negative discipline on the other. Positive discipline means the fostering of co-operation and a high level of morale so that the written and unwritten rules and conditions are obeyed willingly by employees. These rules may cover general terms of employment, hour of work, communication channels, performance standards, organizational expectations and general employees conduct (Onah, 2003). It also embraces good behaviour by managers or supervisors, such as good supervision, treating all employees fairly, eschewing bad manners, being helpful and considerate to staff and setting of good examples by not breaking any rules. This is where, in the opinion of the writers, the problems of public organizations start. Leaders (top civil/Public Servants) who are supposed to lead by example by being disciplined are the very ones who exhibit attitudes of indiscipline. It is, more often than not, the leaders who misuse government vehicles, report late of duty, siphon and embezzle public funds, delay actions on files which come to their tables, get drunk while on duty, play truancy, engage in acts of tribalism, sectionalism and nepotism, sectionalism and

nepotism for deciding who gets what, when and how (Achebe, 1986; Okoli, 2004). These leaders however, expect their subordinates to behave like saints! "It is instructive, nonetheless, of them to know that personal example should be demonstrated, which is the hallmark of true leadership" (Achebe, 1986). Nevertheless, it is indeed, very difficult to change well-embedded ideas, especially when there has been no significant demonstration on the part of the leaders in that direction (Okoli, 2004). Conversely, negative discipline refers to control by force or punishments, threats, warning, pay-cut, interdiction, suspension and dismissal.

Indiscipline, on the other hand, refers to conditions of disorderliness in which members of an organization conduct themselves without respect to the rules and regulations and subordinating their needs and desires to the overall needs of the organization. According to Ochai (1984), staff indiscipline is manifested in many ways in the public sector such as habitual lateness to work, truancy, and lack of commitment to work: loafing, buck-passing or refusing to take responsibility. It also includes bribery and corruption, tribalism and nepotism, misuse of government property, drunkenness, embezzlement or misappropriation of public funds.

Public/Civil Servants, in contemporary public organizations in Nigeria, exhibit discipline at a minimal level coupled with some elements of indiscipline. In this condition, for example, staff may report for duty, in time and sometimes late. On arrival, they may perform their duties without seriousness. After spending few hours on duty some of them take permission to go out of the workplace while others just sneak or vanish. Another group may go to drinking houses or beer parlors', to return to the office only towards the closing time. Some of them may take permission to stay away from the office or workplace for a number of days for fabricated reasons. Others may just absent themselves for reasons that are far from cogent (Ochai, 1984). It is needless to say that productivity is affected negatively by these vices of staff in the public sector. According to Adebayo (2001), such acts of indiscipline include lethargy, apathy, laziness, rudeness to members of the public, malingering, presenting false sick certificates in order to go and attend to private businesses and a host of other deplorable attitudes.

Factors Responsible for Staff Indiscipline
Major reasons for staff indiscipline in the public sector include mismanagement of conflicts, lack of better understanding of conflicts, their root causes, early signs or indicators, dynamics and the manner in which they

can be prevented, brought under control and eventually resolved by the organization (Kankwenda, 2002). Yahcioglu (1996) opines that "people get involved in acts of indiscipline because their interests and values are challenged or because their needs are not meant…" For the purpose of this paper, the reasons for indiscipline in the public sector will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

    (a) The economic factors,
    (b) The socio- cultural factors
    (c)   The socio-political factors
    (d) The management factors:
    (e) Laxity on the part of managers and supervisors
        (i)   Lack of confidence in subordinates
        (ii)   The role of the civil services commission, and
        (iii)   Lack of motivation

(A)   Economic Factors

The economic factors include irregular payment of salaries to workers and high rate of inflation. This is due largely to corrupt practices, which manifest in the mismanagement and/or embezzlement of public funds by public officers including the elected representatives of the people. A healthy economy is a prerequisite to high quality of work life which embraces the satisfaction of high order needs. This cannot happen when workers go about their work on empty stomachs because their salaries have been delayed. According to Onah (1995):

> ... Associated with this is the high rate of indiscipline that attends adverse situations. At times, salaries are not paid as at when due owing to late release of funds. Such situations predispose staff to various acts of indiscipline such as absenteeism, lateness, indolence and other indurate attitude to work, all in the name of lack of money when such situations run into months; management usually finds it difficult to discipline staff as they tend to be uncontrollable.

When, at last, the meager salary is paid, the worker does not enjoy it because he has to settle the debts which he incurred when the salary was not forthcoming. The balance, if any, is so little to the extent that it can take him for only few days due to the high rate of inflation in the country. As a result, he has to look for money from other sources to supplement his salary, and the vicious circle begins

again. This worker, in this condition, can hardly maintain discipline and the only option open to him is to indulge in corrupt practices as a means for survival.

(B)   Social-cultural Factors

The main socio-cultural factors are ethnicity. Under ethnicity we have tribalism, sectionalism, nepotism and favoritism. According to Nnoli, (2008), ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. According him ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture or both. He stated further:

> A feeling or both belonging and rejection becomes the basis for distinguishing individuals in the city (or organization) and at the national, state or local government) level… Under these circumstances, each member of X ethnic group fears that he is regarded as an X by any member of Y or Y ethnic group and would, therefore, is discriminated against by them in the struggle for the scarce socio-economic resources. He believes that they can expect preferences from any member of X in a position to help, and perceives it to be in his interest to promote the activities of all X's in competition with Y's and Z's … anyone who finds himself outside the system of ethnic preferences is lost (Nnoli, 2008).

In other words, ethnicity is ethnic consciousness transformed into a weapon of offence or defence in a competitive process in relation with other groups over desired scarce resources. Ethnic consciousness per se, it should be pointed out, is not bad. What is bad is when it is used by competing groups to the detriment of one another or the organization. As Nnoli points out, ethnic problems can bring about, inter alia, a feeling of rejection, alienation and hospitality. The end result of the worker is a condition of frustration and resignation which can lead to staff indiscipline. In this regard, Chukwuezi (1996) observes that, within the various State Civil Services and parastatals, Sectional or ethnic interest seems to hamper progress. He posits that "promotion, employment, allocation of duties and roles tend to be clouded by

ethnic or sectional consideration. Efficiency and innovativeness are sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity, sectionalism, favoritisms and personal consideration,"

(C)   Social-Political Factors

In the Nigerian public sector, staff recruitment, selection and placement are in most cases politicized. Despite the politicization of the Civil Service through the deliberate entrenchment of the Federal Character Principle in the Constitution (see the third Schedule, part 1 of the 1999 Constitution) to ensure that no State, ethnic or sectional groups dominate others in the appointment, promotion and transfer of employees, some appointments and promotions (especially into some State-owned public organizations) are skewed in favour of some ethnic groups to the neglect of others.

There is also the problem of "god-fatherism" or the patronage system. This is the system whereby some people are employed or promoted in the organization, not on merit but because of some influential people whom they have either known in the establishment or in the wider society. These attitudes can frustrate and discourage those who rely on merit (hard-work, honesty and/or additional qualifications). The frustrated staff consequently resorts to acts of indiscipline for solace.

Another socio-political factor is the in–house fighting (internal conflicts) over leadership of the establishment. Some members may be interested in the organization's leadership to the detriment of others. In his realistic view of conflict in organizations, Kelly (1975) observes that conflict is inevitable. This is because conflict is an integral part any human endeavour. What is bad however, is when such conflicts have destructive undertones. Destructive conflicts and criticisms can make leaders and followers to develop attitudes of indiscipline.

(D)   Management Factor

Under the management factor we have laxity on the part of public sector managers to enforce discipline, lack of confidence in subordinates, lack of proper enforcement of the role of the Civil Service commission and proper motivation of the workforce.

(1)   Laxity on the Part of Managers

Taylor (1967) in his <u>Principles of Scientific Management</u> and McGregor's (1960) Theory 'X' stated that human beings hate wok and would avoid it at

the slightest opportunity. Therefore employees need to be controlled. This is where discipline comes in. The unwillingness on the part of managers to enforce discipline on erring subordinates is one of the factors responsible for staff indiscipline in public organizations in Nigeria. This could be due, partially, to the ethnic factor as discussed earlier. In a bid to discipline a subordinate that comes from a different ethnic group, such action might be misconstrued, as result, manages in some public establishments feel reluctant to enforce discipline amongst subordinates. It could be due also to ethnic cohesion. Staff from the same area may not want to discipline one another so as to maintain ethnic solidarity.

(3)   Lack of Trust in Subordinates

The importance of reposing confidence in subordinate staff by their managers in both public and private sector organizations cannot be over-emphasized. This is because it is the workers who feels recognized and see that his contributions (or services) are appreciated by the superior officers that will feel motivated to put in more productive efforts. On the other hand, lack of confidence in subordinates can make then feel marginalized and /or alienated. The end result is that their contributions, if any, will be minimal.

(3) The Role of the Federal, State and Local Governments Civil Service Commissions

Another case worthy of mentioning is the limited power given to the Federal, State and Local Governments Civil Service Commissions (CSCs) to appoint, promote and discipline civil servants in the ministries and local government councils. According to Akpan (1982), the limited powers given to the civil service commissions to appoint, promote and discipline civil servants makes it difficult for Heads if Government Departments and Ministries to promptly handles cases of indiscipline in their organization as the junior officers know that their immediate senior officers have no power to punish them. This is capable of making them to "grow horns" – carrying their assignments without fear and control of superious – another act of indiscipline.

(4)   Lack of Motivation

A good manager ought to know how to motivate his workers/subordinates. Unfortunately, many public sector managers and supervisors in Nigeria know little or nothing about staff motivation, talkless of applying it. Motivation is a

management element of direction which is concerned with inducing people to work to the best of their ability. It is a process of understanding the need, urges, drives, aspirations, ambitions and strivings which prompt people to do things and providing ways of helping them to satisfy their needs through the organization while at the same time, harnessing their contributions to achieve the organizational goals. Workers expect from managers who are motivation conscious as strategy of making the workforce to perform better to include recognition, praise, fair supervision, good compensation and fair treatment of all staff on an equal basis.

In the motivation model the stimulus could be a need e.g. the need for a higher academic degree. The appropriate behaviour on the part of the staff would be to apply for a study leave. The approval of such application by the management to enable the staff have his needs met would be a motivational booster for higher productivity of the workforce. The goal or desired outcome would be the conferment of the degree on the staff after successfully completing the course. Such a motivated worker on return to his/her place of work is more likely to perform the organizational duties creditability in terms of better skills and knowledge. In addition, the highly motivated staff is more likely to be happy with his/her job and maintain discipline. Conversely, workers who are not properly motivated are likely to exhibit acts if indiscipline in terms of un-seriousness to duty, exhibiting lazy attitudes, non-regard to constituted authority and indulging in corrupt practices as a means of survival.

The Way Forward and Conclusion

Productivity can be increased in the public sector if deliberate attempts are made to address the issues bothering on indiscipline amongst the workforce. Disputes, including acts of indiscipline, which are satisfactorily resolved, or at least managed, help to strengthen the overall system for higher productivity (Ghai, 2002). Therefore, we wish to make the following recommendations, which are capable of serving as panacea for the problem of indiscipline and low productivity in the public sector in Nigeria:

First, to solve or reduce the problem bothering on economic factors, there is the need for the three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local Governments) to regularize the payment of workers wages and salaries. This entails timely release of the monthly allocations from the federation account by the Federal Government and speedy disbursement of the same by the

States and Local Government councils as wages and salaries to workers. This we believe will help to eliminate corruption emanating from non-regular payment of salaries and allowance to workers.

Second, efforts which the federal government is currently making to fight corruption are commendable and should be sustained. All public officials who at one time or the other siphoned (or are siphoning) out or embezzled (or are embezzling) public funds should be brought to book without fear or favour. Furthermore, tough actions inform severe penalty of long jail term without an option of fine should be put in place to deter future offenders. In addition, since money has been rated as the most potent extrinsic factor of motivation, it is hereby recommended that a living wage capable of sustaining employees should be put in place as monthly pay. This will enable staff to meet their unforeseen financial demands.

Third, on ethnicity, we recommend a conscious effort by managers in public sector organizations to re-orientate staff towards fostering unity in spite of workers' diverse ethnic origins. As the saying goes, "United we stand; divided we fall."

Fourth, on the socio-political factor/problem (i.e god-father's, patronage system or in-house fighting), we recommend that merit should be the major criterion for appointments, promotions, transfers and discipline of staff as it is done in private sector organizations, if increased productivity is to be achieves in the public sector.

Fifth, we also wish to recommend that all public sector managers and supervisors should be made to undergo some short-term courses in management to enable them to know and appreciate the need for among others, staff motivation and discipline and how to apply them appropriately.

Sixth, the situation in the civil service as it affects the enforcement of discipline needs a radical change. The power to discipline junior civil servants should be given to the line manages (Head of service, Heads, of departments and others of appropriate status) in the ministries that supervises subordinate employees. If this is not done, the junior officers can flout the authority of their superior officers since they know that the ultimate power to discipline lies elsewhere other than with their superiors.

Seventh, it is hereby recommended that public sector managers should develop confidence in subordinate employees by giving them responsibilities to handle independently. This will motivate staff to put in more productive

efforts, as they feel and realize that their contributions to the accomplishment of the goals of the organization are appreciated.

Finally, subordinate staff should ensure that they do not betray the confidence reposed in them by their superior officers. They can do this by carrying out their work properly and promptly. They should expect corrective measures, which should be taken in good faith. This is positive discipline. Those of them that are naturally or artificially lazy should endeavour to change for the better. If not, they should be prepared for negative disciplinary measures in terms of job termination, which is usually employed as a last resort.

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Note

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