

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS OF ORGANIZATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

Managers of modern organizations are faced with many challenges today; one of them is language and culture. This becomes enormous when the manager has the responsibility of integrating members of the organization who have unique language and cultural values quite distinct from the others to achieve the goals of the organization. The way in which language and culture is managed will therefore, determine the success or failure of the organization. In order to meet up with these challenges, there is need for managers to have good understanding of language and cultural attributes of individual members as it affects their behaviours. This paper therefore, examines language and culture and its implications for managers of organizations in Nigeria. The paper also suggests ways of integrating the culture of members in order to enhance its goals.

Introduction

Language and culture can be used as a double edged sword in modern organizations management. The success or failure of the organization depends on how language and culture is managed in that organization. In order to keep abreast of the growing challenges in the organizations, the managers need to have a good understanding of language and culture as they affect individual or group behaviour.

Conceptual Explication

Language

The concept of language has been defined by scholars from different perspectives. Most definitions of the term are provided by either linguists or anthropologists who specialize in linguistics. This paper will consider some of these definitions given by these scholars in order to understand its meaning.

Womack (2000:154) defined language as “the human ability to encode culturally defined meanings in sounds and to combine units of sounds to generate infinite new meanings through the application of rules”. This definition lays emphasis not only on man’s unique ability of language but also on the essence of rules in language as “an institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols. This definition explains the importance of biology in man’s ability to use language. It also explains the fact that language is made up of symbols.

Yusuf (2007:7) explained language as a type of patterned human behaviour. It is a way, perhaps the most important way in which human being interacts in social situations. Language performs various communicative roles which include the following:

Directive Role: Language is used to influence the behaviour or attitude of other persons as in issuing orders, commands or making requests.

Phatic Role: It is also used as a means of establishing contacts and relationship with other people within one's speech community. This is exemplified in greetings.

Information Role: Language is used to pass on information from one person to the other.

Ideation Role: Here, language is used as a means of controlling or seeking compliance of the forces of nature in consonance with the people's beliefs or faith. This is clearly seen in prayers, libation, incantations and some rituals.

Performative Role: Language can be used to bring about a sudden change in the state of affairs in the real world as soon as the utterance is made. For example, when a pastor pronounces two person 'man and wife' during a wedding ceremony, or when a magistrate sentences someone to a term of imprisonment with hard labour in a law court.

Expressive Role: Language serves as a means by which one can express emotions, feelings or attitudes towards one's fellow being or state of affairs, example of this can be seen from exclamatory and swear words.

Culture

Kirby (1997) explained culture to embrace all behavior learnt through socialization rather than that, which is governed by instinct. Here, culture includes norms and values of a society together with behaviour which is governed by a sense of a tradition, shared history and common identity. Culture is expressed through language and other forms of symbolic representations such as painting, design etc. Culture therefore, includes knowledge, believe, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Values are the fundamental beliefs which a society provides as a general principle for human behaviour in societies. Values are related with norms. Values are the specific cultural goals towards which norms are directed. A norm prescribes actual behaviour, while value justifies that behaviour. This is why some actions are approved of, more than others. Values therefore, make us to attach greater importance to collective rather than individualist commitment.

Attitudes are predisposition to action, which are formed from values; they are developed through experience and can influence behaviour. However, new experience gained can change attitude.

Language and culture is therefore, very important. Their absence will make it impossible for members of a society to communicate and cooperate. The result will therefore, be conflict, confusion and disorder. For this reason, Gillespie (1995) concluded that language (which is cultural) is potent symbol of collective identity and often the site of fierce loyalties. Culture is also an adoptive mechanism. For an entrepreneurial organization to survive, that organization will need to develop a culture that is suitable to its demand. Cultural traits in this case provide useful models for the people to do what needs to be done or what they believe needs to be done. Culture therefore, provides the means for adjusting to the needs of the people within the society. These cultural traits that provide useful models for people to do what needs to be done, should be conveyed to members of the organization using a clear language so that they will understand it and do the right thing that is expected of them.

Management

Management as a concept has so many definitions. Ejiofor (1987) explained management as “the art of working, particularly through people for the achievement of the broad goals of an organization”. In trying to achieve these goals, the manager has to work out strategies, get people and materials to do the jobs, assign people to accomplish different jobs, ensures that these jobs are well done as planned and reports the result to his boss. Udoh and Akpa (2000) opined that management concerns itself with creating, maintaining, stimulating, unifying formally organized human and material energies to accomplish predetermined goals.

Lawal and Hamza (2003) saw management as a process through which scarce resources are combined to achieve certain ends or goals. Here, the functions of management basically include planning, organizing, staffing (recruitment, selection, re-numeration and placement) leading, controlling and coordinating.

The goal of management is to achieve common purpose and objectives. It is therefore, clear that the end product of management is to ensure that all goals are achieved. Personnel management is part of management that is very crucial to managers of organizations. It is very crucial because it deals with human beings who have come from different cultural background and have different beliefs and language which is not easy to manage by most managers. This type of management is concerned with maintenance of human relationship and ensuring the physical well being of employees so that they will put in their best. To achieve this, the managers need to understand their emotional, physical and intellectual needs.

Nwachukwu (1992) added that the managers have to appreciate that each member of the group has his own personal needs and aspirations and that these are influenced by such factors as the ethics, social, political, cultural, economic and the technological environment of which he is a part. This further explains the need for integration and harmonization of individual group member’s culture and organizational aims and objectives.

The Implications of Language and Culture on Management of Organizations in Nigeria.

Culture is the total way of life of members of a society. Culture has three dimensions which are the material, the normative and the cognitive dimensions. The normative aspect of culture which deals with values and norms have major effects on the relationship of workers’ attitude and behavior at work. There are many cultural values but are going to discuss only three of them which are ethnicity or tribe, respect for age and language.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity has to do with personal identification with one’s place of birth and people. This identification implies an obligation on the individual to support, promote and safe guard the interest of his/her ethnic group or tribe. This value is even brought to his place of work (organization). The consequence is that, it creates problem for the managers of the organization in his effort to apply the universal principle of objectivity, fairness and equality or even in using merit in performance appraisal, recruitment and staff selection, and general decision – making. The challenge is further increased with the introduction of certain principles enshrined in the Nigeria’s constitution such as ‘Federal Character’ and ‘Quota System’. The problem of ethnicity has affected the efficiency of management for it can not be easily controlled. For instance, a newly appointed manager wanted to recruit persons from his ethnic group regardless of their merit in terms of qualifications or necessary skills and abilities in carrying out their jobs effectively, the success of the organization will not be

ensured and it will be difficult for the organization to identify the problem since they believe that they should be their brother's keepers even when things are going wrong.

Respect for Age

This is another cultural value that is widely shared in Nigeria. It has both positive and negative sides to managerial functions. Many Nigerians would prefer to have an older person as a leader or boss in their places of work since they believe that age is in most cases, synonymous with wisdom. However, this is not true in organizational setting for age has no relationship with the ability to lead. Nevertheless, respect for age can create difficulties relating to leadership acceptability and control especially where the manager is much younger than his subordinates. In such a situation, the manager will surely have some problems in carrying out his task of controlling and leading.

However, respect for age should be seen as a value that can be re-oriented to mean respect for positions of authorities if it is to be beneficial to management. Here, the manager becomes an 'elder' deserving the subordinates' respect by virtue of his position as a leader regardless of his biological age.

There are some other cultural attitudes that have gained root and have affected management functions. Such cultural attitude includes assigning inferior status to woman in relation to men. Even when some women work hard to attain positions of authority, men find it difficult to accept the leadership and authority of female bosses. The men always create undue pressure for such women in managerial position and always look out for evidence to prove their lack of competence. This cultural trend should be watched carefully to curtail its disruptive tendencies on individuals and organizations in our society.

Language

Language is another important aspect of culture that has positive and negative effect on management function. It is the means for the transmission of socio-cultural thought from one generation to another. Culture is therefore incomplete without language. Language like any other aspects of culture can only be studied and understood in context of culture. This aspect of culture should be carefully used in organization to ensure that the goals of the organization are achieved. Here, the formal language is preferred to informal one, and should be clearly used in order to be understood by both leaders and subordinates of the organization.

Conclusion

Language and culture manifest in different ways in the society. In most cases, they exhibit similarities and differences. The aim of management is to coordinate people with these different cultural values together to achieve success and efficiency. The implication of Nigerian culture on managers of organizations and the aspects of culture that affect management are discussed. Managers are therefore, to be alert to identify such cultural values and aspects for positive management to achieve the organizational goals.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are to be given adequate consideration to help reduce the negative effect of culture on management:

Managers of organizations should be educated and trained on culture management.

Rivalry on cultural differences should be discouraged.

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Cultural values that encourage gender discrimination should be discouraged and banned.
Managers should treat employees and their cultures equally. There should be no preferential treatment.

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