

Chapter 27

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws attention to the relevance of cultures to management philosophy with the purpose of contributing to a culturally viable practice of management in Africa. It has been shown that the different management theories in the form that they have been developed in the West may not fit culturally in Africa. However, in developing theories and building models of management theories in Africa, it is unlikely to pay Africans to throw away all that the West has to offer. Rather, the process of appropriate management theorizing should be to reflect on the assumptions of Western management theories, compare Western assumptions about social and cultural values with African cultural values, and rebuild the theories or models through experimentation. The use of anthropological and philosophical concepts in this context will help in development of appropriate management practice.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of cultural values to management practices in Africa has become increasingly obvious in recent years as many expectations of African organizations and institutions created and managed along lines of Western textbooks and models have not achieved the expected results of sustainable economic development and growth. In Africa, we have very limited knowledge about its cultural values and the consequences it poses for African intellectuals and management practice in African organizations.

While the African intellectuals are very knowledgeable about accepted theories and models of the Western world, knowledge about cultural values of their society is limited. The African intellectuals are not equipped enough to understand the obligations imposed on them by Western cultural values in which they have been socialized and the traditional environment in which they were born and raised, thus, making their ability to contribute something original to the development of their society limited.

Because of failure of the Westernized African managers to identify and take advantage of the ‘growth-positive’ cultural values of their society for effective management practice that the relevancy of western management theories and models utilized in training managers in Universities and business schools to managing organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa comes into question.

Africans have ways of exercising power and authority at the workplace, ways of motivating and rewarding people to make them work harder. Neither the institutions nor the political structures put in place by the colonizers and the so-called African intellectuals to Westernized Africa have respected these indigenous knowledge structures, but much of them have survived in the traditions and cultural values of the African people. However, unlike in Europe and most part of Asia, the attempted modernization or Westernization after independence has completely neglected the native cultural traditions and tried to transfer or transplant ready-made western management theories and models to traditional African soil. The results of these transformations, in most cases, have been disappointing.

The objective of this paper is to draw attention to the relevance of cultural values in management philosophy with the purpose of contributing to a culturally viable and appropriate theories and practice of management in Sub-Saharan Africa. Management practice in Africa requires identification of “growth-positive” and “growth-negative” culture-based factors.

BACKGROUND

Culture Stabilization Patterns

The model of Figure 1, taken from Iguisi and Hofstede (1993), indicates how we assume culture patterns in a country to stabilize themselves through feedback loops, but also to change under the influence of outside forces.

The system of this model in Figure 1 implies that one cannot understand one element-such as, management practice philosophy within the local environment-without its societal and cultural value context.

In the center is a system of societal norms, consisting of the value systems shared by major groups of the population. Their origins are in a variety of ecological factors (in the sense of factors affecting the physical environment). The societal norms have led to the development and pattern maintenance of institutions in society with a particular philosophy, structure and way of functioning. These include the family, education systems, politics, and legislation. These institutions, once they have become facts, reinforce the societal norms and the ecological conditions that led to them. According to Hofstede, in a relatively closed society, such a system will hardly change at all. Institutions may change, but this does not necessarily affect the societal norms; and when these remain unchanged, the persistence influence of a majority value system patiently smooth the new institutions until their structure and functioning is again adapted to the societal norms. Change comes mainly from the outside, through forces of nature (change of climate, silting up of harbors) or forces of man (trade, colonization, scientific discovery) (Hofstede, 1980). The arrow of outside influences is deliberately directed at the origins, not at the societal norms themselves. It is believed that norms change rarely by direct adoption of outside values, but rather through a shift in ecological conditions: technological, economical, and hygienic. In general, the norm shift will be gradual unless the outside influences are particularly violent (Hofstede, 1980a).

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