

ETHICS IN NIGERIA PUBLIC SECTOR: THE HR PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Ethics standards and practices in Nigeria public sector would continue to engage the front burner of discourse in Nigeria for as long as service delivery is synonymous with economic stagnation, weak institutions and endemic corruption. The study was conducted using government agencies and parastatals based in Lagos, Nigeria selected through proportionate stratified sampling technique; standardized measures were adapted and administered on the sample. Apart from the human resource department not being part of ethics infrastructure, the analysis of data also showed that there is no promotion of ethics in the Nigeria public sector. The implications of the findings were discussed.

Keywords: Business ethics, ethics infrastructure, ethics standards, human resource practitioners, public enterprises, public sector, working conditions.

Introduction

The public sector of every nation is germane to her national development. Perhaps, this accounts for why a larger proportion of the Nigeria national budget has been voted for the creation and sustenance of public enterprises (Adeyemo and Salami, 2008). Through its ministries, departments and agencies, government puts in place policies, programmes and services that help galvanize development at all levels, engender economic progress and increase trust and connection between the managers of the state and the people (Imhonopi and Urim, 2013:79). On the contrary, the performance of public sector in Nigeria has been replete with varying contradictions (Adeyemo and Salami, 2008) and has even become an epitome of all that is corrupt, mediocre and fraudulent (Imhonopi and Urim, 2013). As it stands, the public sector in Nigeria has virtually collapsed. Politics and politicisation has systematically bastardised the very essence of the sector. Consequently, morale is weak, remuneration is very poor, efficiency is no more, competence has been ditched and merit abandoned (Kagara, 2009).

Whether in domestic or global companies, ultimately, the commitment to business ethics and foundation is built through organizational culture, with ethical values reflected in the workplace (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009). In the public sector for example, all government departments have to be efficient as they have to deliver value for taxpayers' money. Efficiency encompasses the qualitative and value-laden expectations of the society. In fact, efficient, effective, responsive, transparent and community-oriented public service delivery is an imperative prerequisite because without it unethical behaviour will result (Raga and Taylor, 2005).

Business ethics according to the Society for Human Resource Management (2009) *includes organizational values, guidelines and codes, legal compliance, risk management, and individual and group behavior within the workplace*. The platform for the prevention and tackling of unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector includes the revised Civil Service Rules and the Civil Service Handbook. Chapter 4 of the Civil Service Handbook is on the Code of Ethics in government business. The Handbook states clearly that the civil service must be well disciplined, with rules and regulations adhered to, service paramount, diligence pursued, corrupt practices avoided and parochialism eschewed. On the other hand, there is also the Code of Conduct Bureau (enshrined under the third schedule) in the 1999 Constitution and mandated to maintain a high standard of morality in the conduct of government business and to ensure that the actions and behaviours of public officers conform to the highest standards of public morality and accountability (see United Nations, 2004:14). Despite the best intentions from government, the Nigeria public sector still reels in politicization, merit sacrificed for quota-based recruitment/promotion, fraudulent staff claims, abuse of office/position, *kicks-backs* (i.e. bribe for contract awards), absenteeism, lateness, lack of organizational commitment/citizenship, idleness, insubordination, aggrandizement etc. These personnel concerns could be used to see clearly why SHRM/Ethics Resource Center (2008) reported that the HR department is a primary resource for ethics-related issues.

Operating from the human resource practitioners' perspective, the study would broadly examine ethics standards and practices in Nigeria public sector. The study intends to make a number of contributions. First, the return to civil rule in Nigeria demands that government and her agencies must deliver democracy dividends. Second, the increasing interest in business ethics behooves on stakeholders to jettison the old order and embrace the current global order of business conduct. Third, the study addresses the obvious local literature gap on the subject matter. Fourth (though not the least important), the study makes not just a policy document, it also offers policy direction.

Public sector as engaged in this study includes government agencies, ministries and extra-ministerial departments. They are described in Ezeani (2006:190) as the administrative machine within which the work of government is carried out.

Literature Review

The establishment of business ethics as policy is not new (SHRM, 2009). In fact, Weaver (1993) recounts that a company *code of conduct* was introduced as early as 1913 by J. C. Penny Company (a retailing firm) in the United States. According to Velentzas and Broni (2010), business ethics provide guidelines for acceptable behaviour by organizations in both their strategy formulation and day-to-day operations. It also provides a framework on which the organization could be legally governed. In addition, business ethics consists of prohibitory actions at the workplace (Collier and Esteban 2007:19); such (actions) that moderate the behaviour of the organization with respect to what is right or wrong (Seglin, 2003). It also contains workplace redlines (Collier and Esteban 2007:19) which organizations must respect in dealings with the world (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2008) cited in Velentzas and Broni (2010).

The analysis of ethical issues in human resource management is legitimate and important (Schumann, 2001). The HR department is a primary resource for ethics-related issues although not without the support of the non-management employees, supervisors and top management in respecting organization's ethics standards (SHRM/Ethics Resource Center, 2008) cited in SHRM (2009). Ethics Resource Center (2007) identified some of the unethical behaviours at workplace to include sexually harassing a colleague, lying to internal or external constituents, stealing, engaging in abusive behaviour, violating safety standards, misrepresenting hours worked, discriminating etc. An ethical workplace is established through an organization's culture, values and leadership (SHRM, 2009). Human resource professionals have the opportunity to play a greater role in contributing to organizational success if they are effective in developing systems and policies aligned with the organization's values, goals, and mission (Caldwell, Truong, Linh and Tuan, 2011:171). According to Johnson (2003) all HR practices have an ethical foundation. HR deals with the practical consequences of human behavior. As explained in Society for Human Resource Management (2009), there are six basic elements of ethical business culture (which are well within the confines of human resource management) namely, written standards, ethical training, mechanism for getting advice, means to report anonymously, discipline for misconduct and ethics inclusion in performance rating.

In recent years there has been increasing emphasis on ethical behaviour within public sector jurisdictions and one approach to the description of the ethical characteristics of workplace environments is that of ethical climate (Shacklock, Manning and Hort, 2009). In fact, the Field Theory of Lewin (1975) cited in Shacklock, Manning and Hort (2009) proposed the behaviour of an individual to be a function of the psychological field subjectively experienced by them; thus within the workplace, operationalisation of the psychological field comprises identification of the set of features of the social environment affecting employees' behaviour and decision making. This has been labeled 'organizational climate' (Shacklock, Manning and Hort, 2009:52) and defined more specifically as ethical climate in ethics research (Victor and Cullen 1987; Tseng and Fan, 2011) cited in Shacklock, Manning and Hort (2009). Ethical climate has been found to be a mediator of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee misconduct (Mayer, Kuenzi and Greenbaum, 2010).

The public sector in Nigeria exists to propel socio-economic development and to guard against the control of the economy from foreign domination and exploitation but, the performance of the sector has been replete with varying contradictions (Adeyemo and Salami, 2008). The civil service in Nigeria for example, seems unable to cope with the prevailing ideological, political and economic changes as well as the management innovations; such that the institutional and capacity weakness of the civil service is considered one of the fundamental causes of socio-political upheavals and economic crisis (Chukwuemeka and Eme, 2011:17). Okpala (2012:114) reported that Nigeria lost several hundred billions of Naira over the last few decades due of flagrant abuse of procedures, lack, of transparency and merit in the award of contracts in the public sector.

In the increasingly conscience-focused marketplaces of the 21st century, the demand for more ethical business processes and actions is on the rise (Donaldson, 1982:36) cited in Velentzas and Broni (2010:796). De Colle, S., & Werhane, P. H. (2007) identified key ethical skills that are important for today's workplace: *practical wisdom*- personal integrity and good character, *moral reasoning*- compliance with corporate ethics, and *moral feelings*- cost/benefit analysis (for all stakeholders). By contrast, the Nigerian public sector ever since the country's independence from Britain in 1960 has been grappling with weak governance structure, red-tapism, weak accountability, low professional standards, waste and corruption, poor productivity, and lack of control, redundancy and over-bloated staff structure (Ogunrotifa, 2012). United Nations (2002) cited in United Nations (2004:14-15) identified the following bottlenecks against public service ethics in Nigeria:

...poor adherence to ethical standards by public servants in the country; in particular, simple rules and regulations that could enhance good ethics and efficiency in the public service are generally ignored; the absence of coordinated and harmonized roles, responsibilities and activities among institutions responsible for public service ethics; pervasive corruption as an unethical response to insecurity of tenure, poor employment conditions and, most especially, uncertain future upon retirement; weak enforcement of rules and regulations relating to unethical behavior and corruption; and limited involvement of non-governmental actors in monitoring and reporting unethical behavior..

According to Briggs (2007) the efficiency and effectiveness of any workplace (whether the private or the public sector) largely depend on the caliber of the workforce. In spite government's best efforts to address ethical issues in the public sector (with limited success) through civil service reforms (Ogunrotifa, 2012) and privatization (Adeyemo and Salami, 2008), what is left of government's stake in the public sector is still grappling with manpower challenges. Specifically, some of the challenges include the politicization of the manpower engagement process (Gberevbie, 2009), federal character principle (Tiemo and Arubayi, 2012), outsourcing (Okorie, 2010) and non utilization of job description and job specification in the recruitment process (Briggs, 2007).

Conducive work environment enables employee ethical job performance (Akinyele, 2007). There are relationship among working environment, workers' morale and productivity (Akintayo, 2012) and between work environment and job attitude of employees (Yusuf and Metiboba, 2012). In fact, majority of productivity problems reside in the work environment of organizations (Akinyele, 2010) with working conditions exerting pressure on accountability and public sector financial management (Onuorah and Appah, 2012).

Methodology

The study is quantitative and moderated by deductive approach. In fact, the study drew samples from selected Nigeria government agencies and parastatals based in Lagos Nigeria. The affected agencies and parastatals could not be named owing to confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents. The sampled elements for the study consisted of 200 respondents comprising senior, mid-level and junior employees selected from the agencies and parastatals using the proportionate random and stratified sampling technique. The choice of these agencies and parastatals is informed by nature of their proximity, accessibility and vantage position to assess the subject matter objectively.

The major instrument used for data collection was the *Specific Organizational Ethics Standards and Practices Questionnaire* and *Extent to Which HR Professionals Play a Role in Organizational Ethics Questionnaire* adapted from the Society for Human Resource Management/Ethics Resource Center (2008). The data collected was analysed using Frequency distribution expressed in percentages and Chi-square (X^2) statistics to test the hypotheses formulated for the study.

Research Hypotheses:

- I. There is promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.
- II. The human resource department is part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector.
- III. Poor working conditions are responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

Presentation of Data

Legend: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

TABLE 1: *Frequency Distribution and Descriptive Response of Participants*

S/ Nos.	VARIABLES	N	SA	A	D	SD
1*	There is discipline for employees who violate organization's ethics standards in this organization.	200	50 (25%)	48 (24%)	50 (25%)	52 (26%)
2*	There is a formal ethics program that includes written standards of ethical workplace conduct in this organization.	200	45 (22.5%)	55 (27.5%)	46 (23%)	54 (27%)
3*	There are means for an employee to confidentially or anonymously report violations in this organization.	200	40 (20%)	48 (24%)	60 (30%)	52 (26%)
4*	We have a written non-retaliation policy for employees who report a perceived ethical violation in good faith (e.g., policy to protect whistleblowers) in this organization.	200	40 (20%)	55 (27.5%)	50 (25%)	55 (27.5%)
5*	There is orientation or training on organization's standards of ethical workplace Conduct in this organization.	200	40 (20%)	45 (22.5%)	55 (27.5%)	60 (30%)
6*	We have a mission, vision or value statement that makes reference to ethical workplace conduct in this organization.	200	50 (25%)	55 (27.5%)	45 (22.5%)	40 (20%)
7*	There is specific office, telephone line, e-mail address or web site where one can get advice about workplace ethics issues in this organization.	200	40 (20%)	50 (25%)	50 (25%)	60 (30%)
8*	There is an ethics officer or professional in similar role in this organization.	200	36 (18%)	40 (20%)	57 (28.5%)	67 (33.5%)
9*	There is personnel evaluation of ethical conduct as part of regular performance appraisals in this organization.	200	40 (20%)	50 (25%)	50 (25%)	60 (30%)
10	There is promotion of ethical standards and practices in our organization.		52 (26%)	55 (27.5%)	45 (22.5%)	48 (24%)
11*	The HR department is a primary resource for ethics-related issues in this organization	200	49 (24.5%)	50 (25%)	49 (24.5%)	52 (26%)
12*	The individuals responsible for administering our organization's ethics standards are skilled or experienced in managing ethical concerns.	200	53 (26.5)	43 (21.5%)	47 (23.5%)	57 (28.5%)
13*	HR professionals are involved in formulating ethics policies for this organization	200	54 (27%)	46 (23%)	47 (23.5%)	53 (26.5%)
14*	In this organization, HR professionals are not part of the ethics infrastructure, but they are often tasked with remedying the situation or assisting with the situation caused by ethics violations	200	48 (24%)	55 (27.5%)	45 (22.5%)	52 (26%)
15	The human resource department is part of the ethics infrastructure in our organization.	200	50 (25%)	56 (28%)	48 (24%)	52 (26%)
16	There are good working conditions in our organization.	200	-	10 (5%)	55 (27.5%)	175 (87.5%)
17	The organization's ethics standards are as a result of the poor working conditions.	200	5 (2.5%)	15 (7.5%)	20 (10%)	160 (80%)
18	The working conditions are such that make employees do the right things.	200	14 (7%)	46 (23%)	92 (46%)	48 (24%)
19	Given the organization's working conditions, employees shouldn't be held accountable for not doing the right things.	200	5 (2.5%)	8 (4%)	152 (76%)	35 (17.5%)

Source: Fieldwork 2013

**items based on the adaptation of SHRM/ERC (2008) Specific Organizational Ethics Standards and Practices and the Extent to Which HR Professionals Play a Role in Organizational Ethics Questionnaires.*

Testing of Hypotheses:

Three hypotheses were formulated for the purpose of the study and tested at 0.05% level of significance.

Hypothesis One:

H₀ = There is no promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

H₁ = There is promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

TABLE 2: Chi-square analysis on whether there is promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

Response	Observed Frequency	Actual Frequency	Residual	Df	P. Value	X ²	Level of Significance
SA	52	50	2	3	0.000	0.260	0.05
A	55	50	5				
D	45	50	-5				
SD	48	50	-2				
Total	200						

The chi-square test statistics with value 0.260, 3 degree of freedom and p-value 0.000 is considerably less than 7.815 at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis is accepted while the alternative is rejected. It is therefore concluded that there is no promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector (i.e. X² = 0.260, tab = 7.815, df = 3; p < 0.05).

Hypothesis Two:

H₀ = The human resource department is not part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector.

H₁ = The human resource department is part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector.

TABLE 3: Chi-square analysis on whether the human resource department is part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector.

Response	Observed Frequency	Actual Frequency	Residual	Df	P. Value	X ²	Level of Significance
SA	50	50	0	3	0.000	0.800	0.05
A	56	50	6				
D	48	50	-2				
SD	52	50	2				
Total	200						

The chi-square calculated value 0.800, 3 degree of freedom and p-value 0.000 which is significantly lower than 7.815 at 0.05 level of significance, consequently the null hypothesis is accepted while the alternative is rejected. Therefore, it is concluded that the human resource department is not part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector (i.e. X² = 0.800, tab = 7.815, df = 3; p < 0.05).

Hypothesis Three:

H₀ = Poor working conditions are not responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

H₁ = Poor working conditions are responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

TABLE 4: Chi-square analysis on whether poor working conditions are responsible for unethical standards and practices in the Nigeria public sector.

Response	Observed Frequency	Actual Frequency	Residual	Df	P. Value	X ²	Level of Significance
SA	5	50	-45	3	0.000	325.000	0.05
A	15	50	-35				
D	20	50	-30				
SD	160	50	110				
Total	200						

The chi-square calculated value 325.000, 3 degree of freedom and p-value 0.000 which is significantly higher than 7.815 at 0.05 level of significance, consequently the alternative hypothesis is accepted while the null is rejected. Therefore, it is concluded that poor working conditions are responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector (i.e. X² = 325.000, tab = 7.815, df = 3; p > 0.05).

Discussion on Findings

The first finding indicates that there is lack of promotion of ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector. This finding is consistent with United Nations (2002) cited in United Nations (2004:14-15) where it was reported that *simple rules and regulations that could enhance good ethics and efficiency in the public service are generally ignored* in addition to the *absence of coordinated and harmonized roles, responsibilities and activities among institutions responsible for public service ethics*. Ogunrotifa (2012) described Nigeria public service to be replete with red-tapism, weak accountability, low professional standards, waste and corruption, poor productivity, and lack of control, redundancy and over-bloated staff structure. The promotion of unethical practices in Nigeria public sector is such that *Nigeria lost several hundred billions of Naira over the last few decades due of flagrant abuse of procedures, lack, of transparency and merit in the award of contracts in the public sector* (Okpala, 2012:114). Unfortunately, there are six basic elements of ethical business culture namely, written standards, ethical training, mechanism for getting advice, means to report anonymously, discipline for misconduct and ethics inclusion in performance rating (SHRM, 2009) which (based on the finding) are virtually lacking in Nigeria public sector.

The second finding reveals that the human resource department is not part of the ethics infrastructure in the Nigeria public sector. As reported by Caldwell, Truong, Linh and Tuan, (2011:171) human resource professionals have the opportunity to play a greater role in contributing to organizational success if they are effective in developing systems and policies aligned with the organization's values, goals, and mission. The sad reality in Nigeria public sector is that the inputs of human resource personnel start to wither with the *politicization* of the manpower engagement process (Gberevbie, 2009) and *non utilization of job description and job specification* in the recruitment process (Briggs, 2007).

The study through the third finding, discloses that poor working conditions are responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector. Shacklock, Manning and Hort (2009) in their work on ethical climate, reported of social environment affecting employees' behaviour and decision making. In the same vein, ethical climate has been found to be a mediator of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee misconduct (Mayer, Kuenzi and Greenbaum, 2010). Conducive work environment no doubt, enables employee ethical job performance (Akinyele, 2007). There is relationship between work environment and job attitude of employees (Yusuf and Metiboba, 2012) with working conditions exerting pressure on accountability and public sector financial management (Onuorah and Appah, 2012).

Conclusion

The study examined ethics standards and practices in Nigeria public sector from the human resource practitioners' perspectives and found the promotion of ethics standards and practices in the sector to be low with the human resource department not part of the public sector ethics infrastructure. The study also found poor working conditions responsible for unethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector.

According to SHRM (2009) many feel that the human resource personnel are not part of the ethics infrastructure, yet they are often requested to assist or remedy situations caused by ethical violations. The place of the human resource practitioner in addressing ethical issues in the workplace is inevitable. It is not just in ensuring that the right labour are engaged, the involvement of HR professionals according to Williams and Redmond (2005) *can help their organizations ensure the availability of unfiltered communications, early identification of potential and actual malfeasance and other unethical behavior, and effective measures to prevent issues from recurring*. Government must embrace all the help it can get and the right one too. The public sector must elevate meritocracy and institute value-based reward system.

The benefits of an efficient public sector are enormous not just in reducing the cost of governance but in improving the quality of life of the people. It is important that the public sector have a workable system for identifying and resolving ethics problems. Such a system must be open, accessible and independent of the management bureaucracy and encourage whistle-blowing.

It is hereby concluded (based on the findings) that for successful ethical standards and practices in Nigeria public sector, government's support and commitment are very essential and government must provide the direction for the public sector to rise up and move with the times.

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