

Human Resource Management, Rhetoric or Reality

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"HR is the driving force behind what makes a winning team. We make the argument that the team that fields the best players wins. HR is involved in making sure we field the best players." - Jack Welch, 25 Jan 2013.

Permit me to start by thanking to the University authority for accepting Professor Adeyeye's nomination of an unlearned town man like me speak to you, learned and accomplished scholars, about what I practise and love practising – human resource management. Distinguished Head of the Business Management department, Dr. Rowland Worlu and dear Mrs. Adeniji, thanks for facilitating the arrangements for this interactive session, at such a short notice. Fellow learners (that is the students of this University community), I count it a great honour and pleasure to mingle with you today and grab this opportunity to share and to learn.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, once said that the number one and number two factors that make businesses successful is the human resource (HR). He believes that once a business finds a HR leader that is a pastor (or imam...my words) and, a parent, then you are onto success. A pastor will be empathetic and keep your secret while a parent will tell you straight as it is out of love. This combination will make for a personality that is committed to growing people and putting together a winning team. Furthermore, Jack said he seeks someone with diverse background and experience because such are usually wired for growing people and winning teams.

Therefore, I feel privileged to have found myself in HR management, without prior intent, but divinely arranged. I trained as a mechanical engineer through my first and second degrees. I practised engineering for about a decade and then veered off tangentially into human resource management. I have had the privilege of managing, the human resource functions at management committee level of four large organizations including P&G, Frigoglass, Guinness and currently FMN (i.e. Flour Mills Nigeria).

An enterprise manages four resources to create wealth – materials, machines, money and men. My experiences are in violent agreement with L.F. Urwick that "business houses are made or broken in the long run, not by markets or capital, patents or equipments, but by men". The good news is that these men are the only resources of the four

available to man, that can grow. On that point, I am again in violent agreement with another scholar, Peter F. Drucker. You will agree with me that a combination of these two facts combined makes HR the most crucial factor of success in organizations. It is a professional practice that has evolved over the pre- and post-industrial age. While it is not as old as most other professions, it is at least about 250 years old with the concept of division of labour introduced by Adam Smith in 1776 in his book "The Wealth of Nations". According to Sola Fajana and other authors, HR management as a concept got introduced into Nigeria literature in 1940. Ever since then, there had been tremendous growth in HR practice with yawning for regulation, to drive professionalism and encourage specialization. Trusting that my eminent audience is full of researchers and scholars, with superior knowledge of HR history literatures, I will rather leave that space and concentrate on my area of strength – the practice of HR in the private industry in Nigeria. My intent is to examine that space based on my experience and, establish whether HR practice in Nigeria has been a reality or rhetoric.

The first experience I will like to share is the wide range of definitions and scope of HR practice I have heard of and experienced. The perspective on what HR management is, vary widely from the public service to the private sector. Even within the private sector, multi-national businesses tend to adopt definitions and practice structures from their parent companies while indigenous private organizations grow their own practices heavily influenced by those same factors that shape our national lives. Most definitions situate HR management around the operation of the processes for workforce planning, attracting, recruiting, inducting, directing, controlling, motivating, training, developing, rewarding, and retaining employees. That is operational and incomplete. Recent attempts have been made by the likes of Armstrong (2006), to define HR as strategic, coherent and comprehensive approach, to the management and development of the organization's human resources in which every aspect of the process is wholly integrated within the overall management of the organization. This brings it closer home for me. Dave Ulrich attempted to bring the operational and strategic roles in HR management on one single model by creating the four-quadrant model for HR management – strategic partnering, change agent, employee champion and admin expert. HR practice is fluid and plays all the roles in the four quadrants.

Second thing I will like to share with you is the varying shapes and structures of the management and the practice in different organizations I have worked for. The structure drives the culture. From the shape of the HR function, you could tell if HR management is a functional or organization-wide affair.

Lastly, I want to address the issue of talent management versus personnel management. Personnel management has worked well over the decades and had served the industry well. However, it is mostly reactive, operational and process driven. Talent management on the other hand is proactive, strategic, data and insight driven. I will love to dwell more on this in our interactive session. All the new developments in HR management are focused on talent and organization management. New set of skills are emerging like managing big data and HR Analytics are crucial to multi-year strategic talent and organization planning.

In rounding up, let me therefore dwell on what has worked well for me in the practice:

- HR management must be organization wide and not a function affair. The HR leader is first and foremost a business leader and must be at the table and actively participate in the shaping of the strategic direction of the organization. That equips him with the insights that informed the business strategy, and provides him a platform to embed HR advantage into the business direction.
- Of all the resources a business has – materials, machines, money and men, the real source of sustainable competitive advantage is men. Most organizations do not prioritize this resource in deed though they pay lip service to it and sing the mantra – “our most valued asset”. Organizations that pay attention to this resource will get a huge competitive advantage over those that do not.
- Strategic HR partnering with business leaders must target capacity building for line managers to be sufficiently prepared for HR management. The HR function must support the line managers with tools and platforms to be effective managers of their Human Resources, same way they manage materials, machines and money.

- The HR function must continuously strengthen its front line that partners with line managers to become more and more strategic in focus. Operational processes must be consolidated into center of expertise to minimize operational distractions and make big impact on the achievement of organization objectives.
- These are the five broad areas that the HR functions I have led focus on – Business Partnering, Talent Resourcing, Talent Development, Employee Engagement and Industrial Relations, HR Service Delivery. The last four support the Business Partnering which is the frontline, value add area for the practice.

Conclusion:

I will conclude that the HR management is still at its infancy in Nigeria. The HR practice as the functional profession that drives effective HR management in organizations is evolving and has been on the fast pace in the last two decades in Nigeria. The core of the processes we have adopted are influenced significantly by multi-national companies home office practices and a lot of adaptations are required to truly make the practice suited to our cultural environment. The academic community would be of great assistance if we could collaborate with the industry to study the impact of some of the HR practices and processes in Nigeria and begin to evolve indigenous hybrid that suit our cultural setting. The essence of the practice is to create competitive advantage for our businesses through exceptional talent and organizational effectiveness.