

LINE AND STAFF RELATIONS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM VIS-A-VIS THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

The paper discusses the relationship between the academic staff who form Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and non-academic staff who form Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) in the Nigerian Universities system. It traces the intra University relations and politics between the two groups and opined that there is a "cold war" between them reminiscent of the cold war between the two super powers before the fall of the USSR. It examined the remote and immediate causes of the poor relationship which is adversely affecting productivity of the University system, and proffered solutions amongst them, establishment of Line-staff Relations Committee which will meet periodically to find synergistic solutions and promote detente among the parties.

Introduction

The University system is the highest seat of learning in Nigeria, and in fact, in the world at large. Its basic goals are acquisition and dissemination of knowledge through teaching, research and publication. Thus it is invariably connected with the moulding and character building of those who work in the system (the staff and those who pass through it (the students)). For these goals to be attained a serene environment devoid of rancour among the staff of the organization is required. In every organization, the University organization inclusive, there are two categories of staff-the line and staff personnel. The productivity of the organization depends, among other factors, largely on the cordial working relations between the line and staff personnel of the organization.

This discourse examined the state-of-affairs in the Nigerian University System to determine its productivity or non-productivity; review the line and staff relation in the organization relative to its productivity; and proffer measures to improve relationship between the line and staff personnel in the organization in order to enhance its productivity.

Line Personnel and Their Services

Line personnel in an organization are those staff that perform the primary functions for which the organization is set up (Megginson, et al, 1983). Their basic functions are generally:

- i. Operation:-** Production, manufacturing or generation of service,
- ii. Distribution:-** Marketing, sales or service; and
- iii. Finance:-** Acquisition of funds, utilization of funds and building.

These functions are usually performed by all organizations whether they are manufacturing, service organization or non-profit government organizations like the Universities.

Line services refer to those services (activities) that are substantive or direct to the contribution of the organizational objectives (Oyibo, 1995). The line or chain of command of the line extends from the top-ranking officer of the organization who contributes directly to the achievement of the goals for which the organization is set up to the lowest officer in that cadre. Thus in the university organization, the line staff begins with the Vice-Chancellor, followed by the deputy Vice-chancellors), and runs down the hierarchical ladder to the lowest academic staff -the graduate assistant.

Staff Personnel and Their Services

For the line staff to perform effectively and achieve the objectives of the organization they need manpower, equipment, materials, accounting and various other services. These services are supportive in nature or indirect in their contribution to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the organization.

To perform these services, the chief executive require certain staff units to be manned by specialists in the particular fields, such as, personnel, legal, maintenance, public relations, etc. these units/staff perform facilitating services for all the line departments. These scope of their services is organization wide.

Therefore, staff personnel (specialized staff) are those staff in the organization who perform the secondary function s of the organization. The staff services in the organization include: personnel, safety specialists, legal, accounting, maintenance/estate management, clerical, engineering, public relations, etc. (Magginson, et al, 1983; Oyibo, 1995). Their main duty is to advise, counsel, assist and serve the line and all elements of the organization; hence their function is organization-wide.

The staff chain of command in the University system starts with the Registrar and runs down the hierarchical ladder to the lowest serving staff of the organization -the messenger/janitor. In the organizational structure, some staff personnel arc interspersed among the line departments. Thus in every academic department there are administrative staff who work under the Jlead of Department.

It should be noted that the concepts of line and staff personnel and functions/services do not have any thing to do with the importance per se of the staff involved. It is puiely based on the direct contribution, i.e. either primary or secondary contribution, of the services of the personnel towards the attainment of the goals and objectives of the organization. Therefore, it is erroneous to assume that line personnel in the university system are more important than the staff personnel. For example, in the organization, there are some personnel who are so close to the chief executive that they sometimes take decisions on half of the Chief Executive. They arc staff personnel, e.g. personnel adviser to the chief executive (the Vice-Chancellor) and the Public Relations Officer (PRO).

Intra-University Politics

There are two main groups in the University system; they are the academic staff (the line staff) who form the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU); and the non-academic staff (staff personnel) who form the Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), a junior counterpart of SSANU.

When the internal and external politics, goals and values of these two groups of actors in the University system come in contact, we have sociological processes, which we call intra-Universily relations.

Their coming into contact may be as a result of actions, reactions or linkages. Most of these processes related to competition, negotiations or con diets about who gets what, on what terms and under what acceptable rules or conditions in the University system. This is the intra-University politics.

We have therefore intra-university politics when the three actors interact, react, or associate in ways, which lead to binding association of values in the University system. The actors (ASUU, SSANU, and NASU) in the University system may develop policies and project them towards others and yet there is no intra-university politics. But once the representatives of the three main actors meet either between themselves or with the University authority or with the National Universities Commission (NUC) representatives or with the Ministry of Education representatives, and exchange notes, discuss, debate, argue negotiate or seek accommodation and compromises with a view of achieving binding agreements, then we have intra-university politics. We cannot play down the intensity of politics between these three actors and their members in the University system. The politics is so intense and bitter that it is reminiscent of the cold war between the super powers before the fall of the Soviet Union.

Line-Staff Relations and Productivity of the University System

The question may be asked: how productive are the Nigerian University Organizations? And what is the effect of this line and staff relations on the university productivity?

Productivity is a relative term based on the input compared to the output. If the output outweighs the input, then we can say that the organization is productive. Since the Universities in Nigeria are mostly Public Institutions whose goal is generation of service and not maximization of profit, its productivity is difficult to measure quantitatively. Another criterion measure is to compare the output of the Nigerian University system today with the output of yester-years. While no empirical comparative study had been done to compare the output of the University system at this point in time

to its output in yester-years, say 30 years back, all assumptions point to a degenerating productivity of Chief Onanefe Ibori, speaking at the 4th convocation Ceremony of the University on 29th April, 2000 accused University authorities of compromising in awarding certificates. The results, he asserted, has been the inability of the Universities to meet their primary roles leading to frustration on the part of every stakeholder. He then emphasized that "we all therefore owe posterity and generations yet unborn a duty to bring back our Universities to their previous heights, where they ought to be", (The Guardian, May 4, 2000, Pp. 39).

The Possible Causes of Low University Productivity in Nigeria

The variables are many, ranging from poor maintenance factor of the organizations by the proprietors, to poor staff commitment to duty, and a myriad of other factors. In an address on "the issue of stale of our Educational system" to the convocation of the University of Uyo, the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Mr, Fkacite, lamented the decline in the productivity of the Nigerian university system and opined that a "major decline in the nation's educational system and failure to achieve its basic objectives... will obviously impact adversely on all other indices and hinder our march towards prosperity, progress and stability" (The Guardian 18th June, 2001 Pp. 58).

In the same vein writing on the inadequacies, system performance and sustainability of the Nigerian educational system, Adelemo (2001) asserted that the Nigerian government was worried about the management of resources with in the educational system, the attitude of the participants (administrators, staff and students) and the fact that the massive funds injected into the system (albeit inadequate), the system has not benefited much from it, or at least has not responded in a fashion that would indicate that it has received stimulus from increased funding.

Factors causing or predisposing the decline/decay in the university educational system are multifarious, however prominent among them are: the rather low quality of products of secondary education from which the university draws its students; poor remuneration for university staff, and in spite of this appalling salary package, they are sometimes not paid for months, consequently they sought ways of garnering additional income to sustain their families. As a result, according to Adelemo (2001) these institutions made the university staff to unionize in order to fight for a higher wage and conducive working environment. This meant of course that valuable time and energy are devoted to union activities instead of academic activities. A bye-product of union activities in any organization is strike. In the Nigeria University system, strikes are rampant. When strikes are over, students are rushed through their academic programmes so that they can graduate.

The end-result of all of these is a glaring decline/decay of the Nigeria higher educational system. This discourse, however concerns itself not with the broad issue of causes of low productivity of the Nigerian University system, but with (he cause-effect relationship of line-staff interactions in the university system vis-a-vis the system's productivity. Thus the factor that is of concern to this paper is the intra-University relation and politics between the actors (ASUU, SSANU, NASU, and their members-line and staff personnel) in the University organization.

Right now there is a "Cold War" between the line and staff personnel in the University system in Nigeria. This "Cold War" is characterized by mass media hostilities and antagonism, political intrigues and extensive overt ill-feeling. Avital element in this "Cold War" is rivalry between the two cadres of staff in the system. The central issue in this rivalry is parity in salary and fringe benefits paid to staff and line personnel in the organization. This has resulted always in incessant strike actions in the University system nation-wide.

Once ASUU, the pivotal and initiator of labour negotiations between the employer and the academic staff employees comes out of a strike action as a result of successful negotiation with the Federal government, SSANU and NASU will demand parity and declare their trade dispute. Consequently, the university system is on strike most of the academic session with all academic activities paralyzed, or partially on strike when SSANU and NASU are on strike with academic activities going on, but with "high cost".

It is to be noted that this perennial "Cold War" is affecting the productivity of the University system. For example, most universities in Nigeria are in arrears of their academic work; consequently the normal University calendar has shifted from October through July, to February. This paper need not to tell you that in many cases half-backed products are turned out as finished products.

Let me cite an example of this "Cold War" and its recent time. Delta State University, Abraka, conducted her 4th convocation ceremony for award of degrees on 29th April, 2000, (without the non-academic staff (SSANU) who had been on strike nation-wide for two months. NASU who started the strike earlier than SSANU resumed only on 25th April, therefore their contribution to the convocation preparation was very minimal.

Though the convocation was a huge success (thanks to the doggedness and the indefatigable managerial energy of the Vice Chancellor and the high support of the Registrar it was not the best of situations.

Overt and Covert Reasons For Strained Line and Staff Relations in the System

Line (Academic) and staff (Non-Academic) relations in the Nigerian University organization has never been cordial. On the surface, they work, eat and drink together but inwardly there is a hidden dislike and perhaps jealousy and hatred amongst them.

There had never been agreement as far as labour relations are concerned between them. This is however not surprising because research records show that relations between staff and line in organizations had always produce tensions and conflicts (Megginson, et al, 1983; Roger, 1984). And Pigors and Myers (1977) emphasized that line and staff relations in organizations are antagonistic.

It is therefore not very surprising that the line and staff relations in the University organization produce tension and conflicts, particularly since their training (academic preparation), the nature of work, and salary structure and fringe benefits are different. The major reasons for the strained relations are:

- The line usually resent the functional control exercised by staff officials, functional authority (control) is the right staff specialists have to command line staff/units regarding the functional activity in which the staff specializes: for example, cost-accounting staff requiring line personnel, e.g. dean, to retire certain amount of advance taken or else the money will be withdrawn from his salary.
- Staff officials in production organizations, are usually younger, though this is the reverse in the Nigerian university system; this creates a social gap.
- Line staff alleges that staff personnel always attempt to take credit for actions implemented by them; consequently they do not appreciate the role played by staff in helping them to solve problems.
- Some staff departments are placed relatively very close to the Chief executive, for example, the personnel adviser to the Vice Chancellor who occasionally takes decision on his behalf. Low line personnel tend to dislike this.
- Some staff personnel, because they are close to the Chief Executive, have the tendency to look down on the line persons. For example, Secretary to most Vice Chancellors; thus they become negative and rigid in their approach. This creates conflicts and ill feelings.
- Line officials in the system accuse staff officials of living in an ivory tower. They lock themselves in air-conditioned offices, drinking tea, with messengers at their beck and call; while line staff are sweating in the classroom, and in most cases without a conducive office, if he is fortunate enough to have one particularly in the new generation universities.
- Top management in many cases do not clearly communicate the extent of authority staff has in his relationship with line. Consequently, they over-step their bounds.
- Line personnel think that they produce the work that sustains the organization and that staff personnel reap most of the benefits -a case of "monkey working and baboon eating". After all, they claim that when staff personnel are on strike, they leach and conduct examinations without them.
- The staff feels strongly that they are working in the same system, no matter the difference in education, there must be parity in remuneration. They therefore feel cheated. A situation where this level of overt and covert dislike and exist can never be "ideal" productivity.

Improving Relations Between Line and Staff in the Nigerian University Organization

The Nigerian University system cannot thrive well in this atmosphere of distrust and antagonism between the staff and line. Therefore Chief Executive, the personnel manager and the

chairman of the three labour unions in this system should take necessary steps to improve the relations between these two groups of workers to ensure the Nigerian University productivity. Measures to improve the relations vis-a-vis the productivity include:

- The chief executive should specify the authority and responsibility between the line and staff clearly. This will acquaint them with the limits of their authority and responsibility and prevent encroachment on other people's domain of authority and responsibility;
- Encourage each to be better acquainted with each other's job. A detailed orientation programme which involves movement from department to department for the managerial cadre will go a long way in this direction;
- Broaden the training and academic preparation of non-academic staff through on-the-job and off-the-job training;
- The chief executive should establish an over-all management climate which emphasizes results, team work, and loyalty to the organization as a corporate unit, rather than to just a segment; e.g. to ASUU or SSANU;
- Establish line-staff relations committee that should be meeting periodically to find synergistic solution to staff-line labour disagreements, and emphasis should be placed on team work, team spirit and cooperative relationship. The chairmanship of this committee should rotate every two years between staff and line;
- The Chief University Officers -the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar, the Librarian and Bursar should hold a joint meeting with line and staff top managerial staff periodically. In this forum matters of common interest should be discussed and common accord struck.

Conclusion

The Nigerian University productivity, among other things depends largely on the state of harmony existing between the staff and line personnel, and the general industrial relations. The academic staff and the non-academic staff of the Nigerian University system appear to be strange fellows united only by their desire to achieve their segmental interest and not the corporate body interest. Detente (relaxation of strained relations and tension) between the line and staff in the Nigerian University setting is badly needed. This stale of industrial peace and good working relationship devoid of dysfunctional conflict is needed to bring our universities back to their previous height of productivity and infact improve on that standard. I low well the university authorities are able to restore mutual interest and unity between the line and staff personnel is one factor that will definitely affect the productivity of the university system in Nigeria.

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