

CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS MANAGEMENT THEORIES IN AFRICA AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines the challenges against developing indigenous management theories in Africa and the implications for management practice in Africa. The paper recognizes that there is a dearth of African indigenous management theories, and attributes the situation to both economic and socio-cultural factors in Africa. It notes that the inability to develop indigenous management theories has caused indiscriminate importation of western theories for adoption in Africa, and this has huge negative impact on management practice in Africa. The paper posits that the uncritical adoption of western theories is a major reason for ineffective management practice in Africa and the poor performance of industries in the continent. It therefore calls on stakeholders to look away from foreign based theories and chart a way towards developing indigenous theories that account for African peculiarities, and encourage the application of such theories. It recommends that concerted efforts be made to overcome the challenges bedeviling the development of African indigenous management theories by committing to new ways of thinking and orientation about research and theories, and overhauling African value system towards supporting research leading to development of theories.*

KEYWORDS: Indigenous, Management Theory, Management Practice, Africa, Challenges, Implications.

INTRODUCTION

Management is neither just a matter of hunch nor native ability. It is truly a science (Cole, 2004). Its scientific feature is the fact that it can be systematized (Woolf, 1965; Chandan, 1987). In other words, its elements and practices can be systematically analyzed, classified and organized, and theories and principles formulated for its practice. Its principles and knowledge are transferable and can be learned by anyone with normal human endowment. These features of systematization and theorization portray the scientific aspect of management. However, the extent to which these scientific features are practicable is considerably limited by environment. Thus management as a science (or its scientific nature) is only to a limited extent. This is because management being an off-shoot of social science pertains to that most unpredictable phenomenon, human being. It is concerned with human contacts with one another, and their behaviour under a wide range of pressures and influences, some of which are not easily subject to measurement. Thus, management events are not measurable in exactitude. Because of their inexactness, management theories are less explanatory and predictive than physical science theories. Consequently, the universal applicability of management theories is still very much debated (Wehrick & Koontz, 2003). The influence of differences in environmental effects on human behaviour is the major factor in the debate against the universal applicability of management theories.

Unfortunately, one observes that almost all of the theories in management are developed from the backgrounds of industrially developed countries of the West. But following the debate and as Jaeger (1986) noted, since the external environment of organizations in the developing countries is different from that of the western countries, management theories and practices developed in the developed country context may have only limited applicability in the context of developing world. If the above premise is true, it becomes clear that there is a need to develop management theories that are founded on existing facts in developing societies.

One would have expected that considering the low level of industrial development, scholars in developing countries would be much keen in developing theories that would enhance the practice of management and hence improve organizational performance and industrial development in their societies, using the peculiarities of their societies. Unfortunately, this has never been the case. Instead there has been dearth of management theories by native scholars in developing countries, that are specific to these countries, particularly Africa

(Osigweh, 1985) Several factors have been attributed to this situation and these range from economic to socio-cultural factors. This paper attempts to explore the factors which constitute difficulties in developing indigenous management theories in Africa from a collation of views from the literature and opinion pool of management educationists; and discusses the implications of the situation for management practice in Africa. The objective is to open the minds of stakeholders to these factors and lead them to think about possible ways of reducing the difficulties through attitudinal change and positive reorientation towards research in management and indigenous theories development that will have beneficial impact on management practice in Africa. The ultimate goal is to chart a path for promoting industrial and economic growth in Africa through effective management practice that can emerge via development and application of indigenous management theories that are relevant to African environment and circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is a theoretical exposition of the facts of the moment. It adopts a literary approach to the discussion of the factors affecting the development of indigenous management theory in Africa. The discussion and analysis relied on opinions in the literature from various individuals who have had some experience in research aimed at developing theories to address aspects of management in African context. The discussion is therefore a collation of arguments from different perspectives by management scholars with African interest who have offered criticisms of the African environment with respect to its weaknesses towards the development of management theories.

Concept of Indigenous Management Theory

The concept of theory has been widely explained in the literature and therefore we will be labouring it to address it here as a starting point. We also assume that the concept of management theory has become a common place one and it is now well understood by many people and does not need any further explanations. Perhaps what needs some explanation is the concept of indigenous management theory, particularly with regards to its usage in this paper. The use of the word "indigenous" ordinarily suggests that we are referring to management theories developed by native or indigenous scholars (Ogundele, 1985) i.e. African scholars. This may be part of it but not the whole meaning of our usage of the concept. Above

all, the concept is used to describe a management theory developed by scholars of African management perspective, whether they are Africans or not, for African management situations, based on African environment. The emphasis in our usage is the applicable environmental context and not necessarily the nativity of the theorist. Essentially, we refer to a theory that is designed to address the peculiarities of African societies and management contexts, i.e. management challenges in the context of African society. This definition is generalized to other societies so that we can talk about indigenous management theory with respect to any other society of interest. In general indigenous management theory is a management theory that specifically speaks to management practice in a given society.

Analysis and Discussion of the Factors Affecting the Development of African

Indigenous Management Theories

Evidently, the problems militating against the development of indigenous management theories in Africa are multiple and diverse in nature according to Ogundele (2005). However, in this paper we make attempt to examine only some of the critical challenges which a combination of the literature review and opinion poll of academics in management, as well as our personal analysis of the situation from the perspective of Nigeria, present. The list is discussed as follows:

Lack of tradition in basic and applied research.

Basic research is research carried out for the purpose of discovering knowledge. Applied research is concerned with converting knowledge to practice. It is both forms of research that provide the input for theory formulation. These types of research usually require a thorough understanding of the dynamic relationships within the socio-technical system (the internal environment) and the relationship to the external environment with which the system is in constant interaction, and usually such research do not yield result immediately.

Unfortunately, however, in African societies the concern is more for research that yield immediate result. Business organizations and government institutions are concerned with “action research” in order to solve immediate problems. They are therefore not interested in promoting and sponsoring research effort outside “action research”, and because researchers function within the environment, they are constrained by the requirement of the private and public institutions, to limit their effort to “action research”. Thus, researches that could lead to the development of useful indigenous theories in management are relegated and de-emphasized. In other words there is no tradition in Africa to pursue long term research that are meant for theory development or capable of leading to theory development, because of their focus on solutions to immediate problems.

Lack of Financing for Research

Researches that lead to theory development are capital intensive (have huge financial involvement) and this is usually beyond most researchers particularly academicians who depend on their private fund from salary earning. Whereas in Western countries scholars and researchers get financial support for research efforts, from the public and private sectors, in most African countries, such financial supports are hard to come by. Researchers are therefore financially handicapped to carry out thorough research that could lead to the development of enduring indigenous theories in management. Even in academic institutions where research

grants exist, it is difficult to assess the grants because of undue bureaucracy and sometimes because of selfish reasons by the fund managers.

Lack of interest by scholars

There is inherent lack of interest by scholars in African countries in research leading to theory development. There are three possible reasons for this, first is that, theory oriented research is time consuming and requires patience and dedication. Such patience and commitment are lacking in most researchers in African societies. Second, researchers in Africa are not adequately rewarded. This causes disenchantment and lack of interest by researchers particularly in countries like Nigeria where academicians who are the main people involved in research are poorly remunerated and are financially poor relative to others in industry and their colleagues in other climes. A third reason is the lack of recognition of positive contribution to knowledge.

Only few scholars and academics in many countries in Africa are involved in serious research works. Majority of them are only interested in membership of committees, positions, organizational politics in their institutions, and non-research private activities that can earn them recognition and/or put bread on their table. Although many of them come up with papers for publications, such papers are meant to fulfill the book for promotion. In most cases, the papers are derived from cut and paste of existing works in matters that have been over flogged and have become irrelevant. In other words the papers are recycled results of existing research works without breaking new grounds for the development of a theory that is relevant to a management problem in African environment.

Fast Changing Forces.

In African countries, social and business environments are assailed by forces of change which make them exceedingly volatile. These countries are characterized by unstable political, economic, social, cultural and other environmental factors, all of which present their own unique problems to theory development (Ogundele, 2005). Essentially, environmental instability makes it difficult to track the inter-activeness of variables of interest within the environment, to have a reliable research result that can be used to build a valid and enduring theory.

As we would have learnt, management theories are designed for explaining and predicting behaviour in fairly stable environment (Koontz & O' Donnell, 1976). Thus, fast changes would render irrelevant a theory that was developed to explain certain behaviour before the occurrence of such changes. Instability of relevant factors makes it difficult to measure effectively the degree of interaction among variables. The African environment suffers this weakness.

Ethnic and Cultural Multiplicity.

Fundamentally, management and organization theories are about human behaviour. The theories are aimed at explaining and predicting human behaviour in organizations. But human behaviour largely depends on ethnic and cultural background (Mullins, 2005). Thus people from different backgrounds exhibit different behaviour or react differently under certain circumstances or conditions. Behaviour is influenced by perception and value system and these vary according to culture (Watson, Kumar & Michaelson, 1993).

Thus, a theory developed for one cultural group may not neatly apply to or explain and predict the behaviour of another group from different culture. Therefore where there is ethnic and cultural multiplicity there would be difficulty in developing a theory that would be valid for the behavioral patterns of all the multiple groups. A theory of human behaviour is more successful in homogenous society than in heterogeneous society (Jaeger, 1986). African countries are heterogeneous societies with a multiplicity of ethnicity and culture. This makes difficult to develop a theory that explains human behaviour in organization, since persons from different cultures converge as employees in the organization, with each person having his own values and perceptions according to his background; and reacts to research stimuli differently. In other words, African societies and organizational environment in most cases, suffer cultural heterogeneity problems, which make it difficult in research effort to discern a pattern of behaviour that can form the basis for generalization and theorizing.

Wrong Value System.

Values refer to the principles, standards, or qualities which guide human actions. Values are what an individual or group of individuals regards as important or relevant (Hofstede, 1991). Values, in other words, refer to person(s) sense of judgment of what is good or bad, what is relevant or irrelevant and what can be regarded as achievement. A value system refers to how individuals or group of individuals organized their values (Trompennars, 1993).

In countries of Africa, values are organized around material and financial acquisition. Things that are not physical and cannot bring immediate material gains are of no value and are not regarded as achievement. Whereas in Western societies success of people is often judged using pragmatic results of their endeavours, in African societies, success has more to do with the maintenance of the wellbeing of persons. Academic or scholarly works - research findings and theory development - do not fall within this category and therefore suffer misplacement in these societies. In view of this, potential researchers turn their face to areas of achievement which fall within the value of society-engaging in activities that are visibly material and financial gain oriented, while considering research activity and theory building as waste of effort.

Lack of utilization of research findings and application of theories by managers in African societies.

In African countries managers hardly apply research findings and theories in the belief that they do not work. Therefore, largely, management practice has been divorced of the application of research findings and theories (Ogundele, 2005). The lack of interest by managers to utilize research findings and theories has remained a source of discouragement to researchers and scholars from engaging in further research which to them may not be utilized by managers or industries.

Low level of Abstractive Thinking.

In developing countries, the mode of thinking is associative. In this mode of thinking, people utilize associations among events that may not have much logical basis. In associative cultures, the context plays an important role in determining an individual's perceptions, attributions and behavior (Hofstede, 1991 and Trompennar, 1993). In contrast in abstractive cultures, these tend to be influenced more by abstract rules and principles applied equally to every situation.

In Western societies, the culture (mode of thinking) is abstractive, resulting in the use of abstract principles, rules, and procedures that are derived from research findings and are

considered absolutes, and hence override contextual forces in guiding behaviour. Whereas, in African societies the influence of contextual forces often negate principles in determining individual or organizational behaviour in given situations.

Essentially, the point of instruction is that, while in Western societies the mode of thinking is supportive of research and theorization, the associative mode of thinking of the African societies inhibits research and theorization. This is one important source of difficulties in the development of management theories in African countries.

Implications for Management Practice in Africa

The challenges in developing indigenous management theories in Africa come with far reaching implications for management practice in Africa. Evidently a major implication of the situation is that it has led to a dearth of indigenous theories in management in Africa and the attendant effect is over reliance on foreign based theories in management practice. These theories are alien to African environment and therefore cannot provide a reliable structure for management practice in African context.

The absence of sufficient theories based on the environment of African societies has indeed turned western management thought and theories into 'sacred cows' for management practice by the few African managers who believe in the efficacy of theories in industry. Therefore, many organizational practices and management development programmes in African societies are based on an uncritical adoption of the prescriptions of theories founded on the experiences from western societies, with utter disregard for the fundamental variations in socio-cultural conditions and circumstances which may affect the effectiveness and hence the validity of theories across societies.

The result of this uncritical adoption of western theories and thought, by managers in African societies is that, in many cases, organizations have failed to achieve set goals following strategies or prescriptions of western theories. Jaeger (1986) puts it that, uncritical transfer of management theories and techniques based on western ideologies and value systems to Africa has in many ways contributed to organizational inefficiency and ineffectiveness in Africa. In other words the dearth of management theories in African context and the inevitable transfer and adoption of Western oriented theories has been a major internal contributor to the ineffective management practice experience in Africa and consequently, the poor industrial performance across the African continent.

Essentially, if theories are the structure or foundation for effective management practice, then management practice in Africa, in the absence of African contextual management theories, is resting on faulty structure that is not likely to sustain the dream for increase industrial performance and growth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dearth of indigenous management theories in Africa is no doubt a major challenge to effective management practice in the continent. The critical role of effective management practice in organizational performance and industrial growth, and the impact of these on economic development, cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, for the purpose of these parameters, if effective management practice is desirable and it is to be achieved in Africa,

emphasis must be on the development of indigenous management theories. This requires that the challenges against the development of indigenous management theories in Africa must be tackled and addressed to pave way for, and promote interest in the development of indigenous theories. The challenges are not un-surmountable, it merely requires a re-orientation of mindset and value system and a strong will by Africans to promote the development and application of indigenous management theories. This clarion call is to all stakeholders- governments, business organizations, individuals and management scholars- to be involved and do all that is necessary in their capacities to be part of the promotion of indigenous management theories in Africa. In so doing they will be paving way for effective management practice and therefore improved performance in industry as a path way for economic development. In this regard, it is recommended that the change of orientation and values should include government and institutional financial support for research in the field of management and such funding be delivered adequately and effectively to the right persons without unnecessary conditionalities, and be devoid of manipulations and political intrigues. Furthermore, academics involved in long term research should be granted and allowed to go on research holidays for full concentration on their research activities, particularly research persons in the universities, while their full salaries still run, to enable them come up with valid results or findings that can be used for building relevant management theories. Lastly, persons engaged in research works must be appreciated for their contributions to development and adequately rewarded and paid attractive personal financial compensation comparable to what obtains in western world for their roles and contributions to make them fair equally with their counterparts in other parts of the world and make them attracted to research. They must be provided livelihood resources for comfortable life.

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