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IMPROVING PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE THROUGH PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

By

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ABSTRACT

There is the need for the public sector in Nigeria to increase its productivity. The level of performance of the public service has a lot of implications for the speedy recovery of the country's ailing economy. Concerned citizens have criticised the public service for its numerous lapses including ineffectiveness, slowness and low level of productivity among others. Some suggestions have been offered by observers for the improvement in public service organisations' contributions to national development. Despite these suggestions and efforts to formulate and implement policies based on these suggestions, the overall productivity of the public services in Nigeria has remained low.

The focus of this paper therefore is to examine the role a proper performance evaluation system can play in increasing, to a large extent, the productivity of employees in the public sector and to assess the present performance evaluation system in the public service.

INTRODUCTION

Public sector organisations in all countries are assumed to be institutions created by government to serve as instruments of national development. Through them, the formulation of good and effective policies and their successful implementation are expected to be realised. Indeed, the public sector of any nation, to a large extent remains the greatest asset of the state for the realisation of its socio-economic and political transformation. It is for this reason that the success or failure of any government is assessed through the performances of its public sector. The need to ensure consistent improvement in the performances of the sector is therefore obvious. Unfortunately, the Nigerian public service has, over the years, performed below expectation and has therefore been subjected to public criticisms. Critics and analysts attributed the alleged poor performance of the public sector to lack of effective performance evaluation in the public service. They argue that once job description has taken place, the employees' performances must be evaluated through a performance evaluation method

which must be systematic, fair and equitable. This is one of the most important functions of personnel management which usually generates so much argument and, may be, rancour.

The objective of this article is therefore to examine the relevance of performance evaluation as an effective instrument for the improvement of public sector performance. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section highlights the importance of human resources and the role of performance evaluation in the public sector. Section two examines the effectiveness of present system of performance evaluation in the Nigerian public service. Conclusion and Recommendations then follow.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

All private and public organisations are set up to achieve certain aims and objectives at minimum cost. In order to do this, organisations have to depend heavily on the management of the human resources available to them. In fact, for any organisation to be effective and efficient enough to achieve its set objectives, it must aim at adequate development and optimum utilisation of its human resources. Thus, human resource can be seen as the most important resource in any enterprise.

But human resource is also complex in nature. A major aspect of man's complexity is the fact that he has aspirations. He has a keen sense of what constitutes justice or injustice. He can experience disappointments. He can also react. Unlike

other resources, he is capable of growing in his capacity to serve. All these factors can effect his performance and by implication that of the organisation either positively or negatively. This is why human beings should come first in the list of priorities in any organisation, even in a factory fully automated; somebody still has to press the button¹. In view of the uniqueness, importance and the complexity of human resource in any organisation, considerable efforts have always been made by both private and public organisations towards the efficient utilisation of the available human resources in order to bring out the best in a worker.

One of the ways to achieve this is through performance evaluation which has been described as the regular (usually bi-annual or annual) formalised and recorded review of the way in which an individual is performing his job.² Performance evaluation is sometimes referred to as performance appraisal, staff appraisal or personal assessment. It is simply a process in which superiors regularly evaluate and report on the performance, attainments, abilities, potentials for future development and other qualities of their organisational subordinates.³ It enables an organisation to evaluate regularly and systematically, the performance of its employees. It is a key element of personnel management. It has great potentials for improving personnel management practices, enhancing managerial competence and increasing productivity.⁴ In order to get employees to work hard, management must tell them exactly what to

do, judge how well they have performed and reward or punish them accordingly. This is the essence of performance evaluation.

Additionally, performance evaluation has the following broad based objectives which are directed at the general improvement in the overall effectiveness of any organisation. The objectives of performance evaluation are to:

1. provide an opportunity for the superior and his subordinates to review the work in the light of goals set. It provides an opportunity for the superior to tell the subordinate his strength and weaknesses. In response, it provides an opportunity for the individual employee to know his/her potential and the need for development in his/her job for improvement.
2. discover the training needs of the employees. It aims at finding out inadequacies and deficiencies that could be remedied by training. Such training and development are expected to improve the performance of employees.
3. ensure improved communication between the superiors and the subordinates through the appraisal interviews which present a unique opportunity for both parties to express their opinions in addition to the normal day - to - day communication.
4. arrive at a just decision on compensation. The results of a good appraisal system provide the basis for any increases, promotion, demotion and transfer decisions.

decisions.

5. improving the selection of applicants for future job performance. use it as an instrument of motivating the employees to reach organisational standards and objectives. It is also used to develop individuals by advice information and shaping behaviour by positive and negative reinforcement.

In essence performance evaluation is now recognised as an important tool in management. It helps management to set its objectives, select or train the right calibre of personnel that will ensure the attainment of stated objectives, establish standards of satisfactory performance, keep employees sufficiently motivated to attain set standards, determine any variance between actual performance and performance standards and take appropriate measures to rectify such variances.⁵

A number of techniques or systems are adopted for performance evaluation. These vary from organisation to organisation. Some of the common techniques are graphic rating (commonly used in industries), employees comparison system, forced choice distribution method, critical incidence techniques, objective-oriented systems, result-oriented system and the behavioural anchored rating scale among others. One or a combination of different techniques is often used in organisations depending on the prevailing situation. For example, output measurement may be very effective in measuring performance where an identifiable product is produced but not where service or policy is the output.

II. PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

Having examined the importance of human resource and the need to use performance evaluation to monitor performance to lead to increase in productivity, it is equally important at this point to examine performance evaluation processes and practices in the Nigerian Public Sector to determine its effectiveness or otherwise. This is because, unless it is well conceived and adequately executed, it is not likely to attain desired aim.

There are two types of form. One is based on a "closed" system and the other on an "open" system. Public sector organisations which favour the "closed system believe that it gives room for raters to report more objectively and freely on the performance and potential of their subordinates than it is possible under an "open system. It is also believed that such reports are considered more valuable as aids to decision-making on pay and promotion. However, a number of criticisms have been levied against the closed system. It is argued, for instance, that the closed system produces feelings of suspicion and resentment whereby employees know that they are being "secretly" reported on with no opportunity of defending themselves since there is no feedback.⁶

Again, the system places too much emphasis on personal traits such as appearance, punctuality, leadership qualities, loyalty, dependability and co-operation of the officers. The system has also been found to be

cloaked in such secrecy that it could not have been intended to assist the employee in having a better understanding of what he is expected to do and how his performance is judged by his superior officer. It thus follows that the officer reported upon is denied the benefit of feedback which could either lead to reinforcement of good performance or a correction of deficiencies.⁷

On the other hand, the "open" system which is the focus of this paper makes it possible for the person being reported upon to see the contents of the report on him which should also be discussed with him by the reporting officer. The subordinate also has the opportunity of making comments on the report before he signs it. The open system was introduced in response to the criticisms of the "closed" system which has been found to be highly subjective and therefore ineffective as a method of performance evaluation. Indeed, the "closed" system has been criticised by almost all public officers whose performance has been evaluated through this system, at seminars and in documents such as the Udoji Report.

For example, in 1972, the then Federal Military Government felt that the public services in Nigeria were not functioning satisfactorily. It then set up the Public Service Review Commission commonly called the Udoji Commission (after the name of its Chairman Chief J. Udoji) which submitted a comprehensive report to the government. The central theme of the Commission's report was the recommendation that a new Public Ser-

vice with emphasis on result-oriented management, professionalisation of public service personnel and improved use of manpower resources through effective personnel management be introduced. Furthermore, the Commission considered the importance of performance evaluation as an important element in personnel management in the public service, and reviewed the performance evaluation system in the Public Service. In the review, it noted that numerous weaknesses and criticisms levied against the Confidential Report (closed or secret) system which rendered it incapable of ensuring a result-oriented public service. The commission therefore recommended the replacement of the closed/secret system with the "open" reporting system of performance evaluation. The Commission's recommendation was accepted by the government to demonstrate its commitment to achieve improved performance in the public service. The open system recommended by the Commission came into operation in 1975.

Open System in Practice

The open system has been in operation for more than a decade. And in order to ensure that it enhances good performance in the public service, management techniques such as Management by Objectives (MBO) was introduced into the public service. The open system places premium on setting of objectives, periodic assessment of performance, prompt reward for good performance, rectification of deficiencies through training and counselling and meting

out sanctions where necessary. Furthermore, the "open" system makes provision for an appraisal interview during which the reporting officer and the officer reported upon are expected, among other things, to discuss and agree on the latter's main duties during the period covered by the report. Moreover, the officer reported upon, in addition to having knowledge of his superior officer's ratings, is permitted to state his objections to the ratings. It also makes provision for comments on the long-term potential of the officer reported upon. Indeed, the "openness" of this system allows the officer being reported upon to have the much-needed feedback on his performance.

Similarly, the system helps in determining capability of the employees to perform and to identify causes of poor performance as well as the appropriate remedies. Its openness gives subordinates an opportunity to express their own views and to appeal against assessments which they consider to be biased or unfair. The system therefore puts pressure on the superiors to do their best to write accurate and unbiased reports.

Despite the use of the "open system" as described above, performance evaluation has remained largely ineffective as a means of improving performance of public officers in Nigeria. Although all public sector organisations use the "open systems" to evaluate their staff, most of these evaluation exercises cannot be described as effective because they have not achieved the objective of open system which is increased productivity of the employees in the public

sector in Nigeria. A number of factors have been identified as being responsible for the dismal failure of this open reporting system of performance evaluation in the Nigerian Public Service since 1975.

One major reason for its failure is the tendency for the superiors (raters) in the public service to see the performance evaluation of their subordinates as an exercise aimed at recommending or not recommending alone. In fact, in most Public sector organisations, performance evaluation has become synonymous with promotion where raters rely almost entirely on the use of "Calendar Seniority" and educational attainments instead of performance to recommend the promotion of their employees.

The design of the annual Performance Evaluation Form constitutes a problem for the users. The Udoji Commission made a number of amendments on the old reporting form to ensure improvement and objectivity. The amended format specifically includes a section that spells out the task on which evaluation is based. Notes are also included on how to complete the form. However, despite these, the present form still contains some flaws. For instance, a critical look at the aspect of the form which deals with such attributes as foresight, penetration and judgement indicates that such aspects of performance which also include relation with colleagues, drive and determination are virtually unquantifiable. Besides, all categories of employees are subject to these aspects of performance evaluation without adequate consideration for

the official capacity, educational background and the responsibilities of individual employees⁸. As it is to be expected, not all duties require the application of some of these attributes. For instance, an office messenger whose duties are to run errands need not be assessed on such attribute like foresight, penetration etc. The point we are making is that when attributes other than related ones are used, the problem of evaluating employees whose duties do not require such attributes remains unresolved.

Closely related to the above is the problem of lack of clearly defined job description in most public sector organisations. Since job descriptions are not properly set out in public organisations, proper and objective performance evaluation cannot be achieved. This is because it will be difficult if not impossible for correct assessment of the performances of employees whose specific functions are not stated or clearly stated. The job description aspect of the form is therefore greatly inadequate to serve as a guide for required standards of performance for the employees. Where performance standards even describe how much or how well the job is to be performed, such standards may only be suitable for some type of tasks. For example, performance standards can be set for jobs in production line and farming. There will however be difficulty in setting performance standards for most administrative jobs.

It is not sufficient to set performance standard and proceed to evaluate the employees on them. It is equally important that such evalua-

tion takes into consideration the organisational environment. This seems to be ignored when superiors evaluate their subordinates. In recent times, organisational environment in most establishments in the public sector of Nigeria are not favourable or conducive enough to ensure high performance and productivity. In most of these organisations, operational tools are grossly inadequate, obsolete and in some cases not available at all. The grim financial position of government brought about by the present economic depression in the country is a major factor responsible for this. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect employees without adequate tools to work with, to attain a high level of performance. It should be added that other related factors such as faulty communication, low morale, inadequate training, lack of co-operation by other employees and poor working conditions are outside the control of the employee but have profound effect on his performance which is subject to evaluation under the evaluation system.

Lack of training for the Raters or reporting officers has been identified as another major cause of failure of the present system of performance evaluation in the Public Service. Performance evaluation procedure in the public service requires that the rater who is usually the immediate superior of the person to be rated should evaluate the performances of his subordinates as he is frequently in contact and therefore will be familiar with the performance of his subordinates. Although his ratings are often reviewed and approved by

higher management thereby maintaining hierarchical control over the performance evaluation process, the evaluation of the rater in the process is still considered the most important guide for further evaluation. This is why the higher management takes into consideration both the evaluation and the quality of the rater before arriving at a conclusion.⁹

In essence, the rater himself must be knowledgeable about the existing rating system to be able to evaluate his subordinates and pass sound and reliable judgement on their performance.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case because quite a sizeable number of public officers who are called upon to evaluate others are completely ignorant of the very essence and correct processes of the present evaluation system. This is probably because the required training has not been given to the raters, and if they have been given at all, such training is not enough to equip them adequately with the knowledge of what is required by the system. The same thing can be said about the use of appraisal interview where it has been shown that less than 10% of public servants who carry out performance evaluation can handle an appraisal interview.¹⁰

To be sure, appraisal interviews are very important in any objective performance evaluation exercise because they ensure participation of subordinates in the evaluation system which is vital for its success. Such interviews ensure two-way communication. When these interviews are properly conducted, the level of satisfaction on the part of both par-

ties tends to be high. Thus, the Udoji Commission was correct in its report by suggesting the use of appraisal interview. In the opinion of the Commission, the best results are likely to be obtained if a well structured interview at which the senior and the junior officers discuss how the latter is getting on with his assignment is used in the evaluation process.¹¹ But as it has been noted above, there are few raters in the public service who actually know how to use the appraisal interview to evaluate the performance of workers. One reason for this general lack of the required knowledge on this system is probably due to the fact that since the introduction of the system in 1975, a lot of top civil servants who had the initial training on the new system had left the service.

The failure of "open" system of performance evaluation in the public service can also be attributed to human and social factors that are associated with the system. It is possible, for instance, for raters to try to 'play safe' in order to avoid having trouble with subordinates and to ensure and maintain cordial relationship with them - such raters are thus "forced" against their wish, to inflate performance evaluation scores of subordinates who do not deserve such ratings. Such inflated rating definitely lacks objectivity for which performance evaluation has been designed to achieve.

Excessive deference to social factor also affected the performance of employees if one considers the features of African Societies where the presence and influence of social forces such as ethnic background, political

influence, cultural demands, family ties, religious affiliations, membership of clubs and social organisations among others, determine the extent of interactions and relationships of workers at places of work. The possible influence of these forces can therefore not be underestimated in Nigeria although its frequency and magnitude may not be readily measurable.¹² The influence of the above social factors could be in favour of the subordinate, through inflated gradings, , as a result of the rater's cordial relationship with such subordinates. It could also be negative, that is, against the subordinates as a result of a strained relationship, or other negative social factors. The important point to note here is that, whichever way the influence tilts, it negates objectivity which performance evaluation is meant to provide and maintain.

Finally, the issue of office politics need to be considered because it is now recognised as one of the major contributing factors to the failure of performance evaluation in the public service. Generally, Nigerians share, to a great extent, common belief in hardwork. All religions and religious leaders admonish their followers to work hard so that they can reap huge rewards. But the fact is that it is not always the case that hardwork alone is all it takes to achieve success in all human undertakings especially in a work place. Other factors including office politics which is in fact an inevitable aspect of any organisation is sometimes directly related to the measurement of success of the worker. Office politics is to the office as power politics is to any govern-

ment. The common elements in office politics are patrons/client relationship, sexual harassment and formation of cliques among others. However, unlike power politics, office politics is not designed for attainment of any public, office politics is not designed for attainment of any public good, rather it is used as a major tool for the achievement of personal goals.¹³

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We have examined the importance of human resources and its relationship with performance evaluation and productivity. We have also examined the operations of performance evaluation and identified the major problems militating against it as an effective means of increasing productivity in the public service of Nigeria. From the discussion in this paper, it is not out of place to conclude that open reporting system of performance evaluation has remained largely ineffective as a means of improving workers' performance in the public service. This is in spite of its great potentials to do so. A number of problems such as the design of the report form, lack of training and proper understanding of the essence of the evaluation system on the part of the Raters, the influence of human and social factors among others have been identified as factors inhibiting objective performance evaluation.

Since human resource is the most important resource in any organisation, adequate attention must therefore be paid to the monitoring of the performances of public officers at

work in order to reward and punish where and when appropriate, good or bad performances. If the performance evaluation system is not objective, wrong persons would be rewarded or punished. This would adversely affect the level of productivity in the public service.

In the light of the above, and in order to make the open system as objective and effective as possible, the following things need be done.

These are:

1. Training and retraining of reporting officers. The operators of the system must be adequately familiar with the correct processes and objectives of the performance evaluation exercise. Raters should also be informed to guide against common errors such as lack of objectivity, excessive leniency, personal bias, etc. This could be done through organised debates, seminars and workshops during which personal experiences, frustrations, hopes and aspirations can be shared.
2. The Annual Performance evaluation report form should be redesigned in order to eliminate the inherent flaws identified in it. Less emphasis should be placed on aspects of the form dealing with attributes which are not quantifiable and sometimes not related to the job. This will reduce greatly, the possibility of raters offering different interpretations of these attributes. Again, the specific operational definitions of these attributes must be clearly spelt out as a guide for

raters during performance evaluation exercise. This will go a long way in ensuring a fairly uniform interpretation of these attributes in different subordinates. Instead of the commonly used factors such as attitude, loyalty and personality, it will be more appropriate to stress job related factors such as output of work, quality of work, management of staff, punctuality at work and similar factors. Although these factors are present in the form, they should receive greater attention than other personal attributes.

3. In order to achieve the objectives of performance evaluation, assessment and grading of employees performances should not be carried out once in a year as it is the practice in the public service. Performance of public officers are usually assessed at the end of a calendar year without any provisions for continuous assessment of their performances. This is rather too long a period for proper, consistent, reliable and objective performance evaluation. It would be unfair for employees to be told at the end of the year that their performance during the year has not been satisfactory. What must be done is to monitor closely, the performances of workers at work and errors pointed out as they occur for necessary correction from time to time.
4. In order to reduce the negative influences of the various human and social factors and those of office politics which militate

against objectivity, it is suggested that the appraisal interview system should be reviewed. This review should make it possible for the appraisal interviews to be conducted by the rater with two or more superior officers who are in a position to assess both the rater and the officer being rated. By this, the rater will be compelled to justify this ratings. The exercise would therefore no longer be seen as a one-man affair. It will also make subordinates less vulnerable to the whims and caprices of their immediate superior officers who report on them.

5. It is also recommended that, in order to ensure proper performance evaluation system in the public service, necessary operational tools must be adequately provided by government for public officers to work with and good working conditions created in the public service. This will encourage higher productivity and ensure better management of the human resource which may be under utilised when these tools are either inadequate or totally not available. The present performance evaluation system in the Nigerian Public Service has its good potentials capable of showing the best and the worst sides of a worker and if the system is improved upon in line with the recommendations above, there will be considerable improvement in the performance of the average Nigerian Public Servant.

NOTES

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4. Ogunlana J. "Performance Evaluation As Key Element in Public Service Personnel Management" Lecture delivered to the Committee of Heads of Federal Departments in Kwara State on 25th June, 1985 p. 1.
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9. Lippitt R. W. *The Management of Human Resources* (The Dryden Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1976, p. 213.
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11. See the Public Service Review Commission Main Report, 1974. p. 47
12. See Ogunlana J. O. *Performance Evaluation: A study of the open Reporting system of performance Evaluation in the Kwara State Civil Service* Unpublished MPA Thesis, University of Ilorin, 1988 p. 36.

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