

PREVAILING PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIENTATION AMONG NIGERIANS: THE IMPEDIMENT TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

Harry Obi-Nwosu Ph.D

Department of Psychology Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka

Abstract

Nigeria has continued to be a poor and under-developed country because of improper management of the vast natural and human resources we are endowed with. Personal and sectional interests have overshadowed national interests and the resultant culture is laissez faire attitude towards anything designed for common good. This carelessness and corruption are overt manifestations of psychological states of public property managers such as: externality locus of control orientation, responsibility attribution away from self, poor mental health hygiene and 'the Nigerian factor'. Reversal of this trend of poor public property management can be effected through application of cognitive behavioural approaches as discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Management of public property and infrastructure in Nigeria has for long been a subject of both formal and informal discussions. In small and large groups, people gather to wonder why it is that 'businesses' managed by individuals for themselves thrive and prosper while the same "businesses" decay soon after incubation, once they are funded from public coffers. Why is it that public businesses collapse while privately run ones flourish even when the former may be blessed with the best of all the factors of production.

-Qualified personnel

-Better equipment

-Better space, and more Capital

Why is it that public buildings and installations acquired with fabulous amounts of public funds are lying waste here and there and often vandalized, yet such property owned by individuals, are optimally utilized and cared for? Why would a brand new "Official" car be turned to scrap in less than 10 years of use while a 15 year old 'tokumbo' car serves the same driver and officer effectively as a pleasure car?

One straight answer is mismanagement, which has become the bane of the Nigerian state for over three decades now. It is of this canker worm (during the immediate post war decade) that Cookey and his colleagues reported thus: "Unfortunately the opportunities offered by the oil boom for the realization of these promises and commitments (a great and dynamic economy, a just and egalitarian society, a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens) were largely wasted. Earned revenue was lavished on unviable and grandiose projects which were very poorly thought through, and enormous contracts grossly inflated. Corruption flourished on a

scale almost impossible to imagine. The oil boom sparked off an oppressive culture of importation in the course of which the ports became congested and the country had to pay a fortune in demurrage. All interests converged on the appropriation and consumption of oil revenues but not on production, investment or on any concern for effective development of production forces. The phenomenon of abandoned mountains of bags of imported fertilizers and cement, machinery worth millions of Naira left rusting away in open fields, newly built tarred roads of thousands of kilo meters washed away by the first rainfall and many more colossal waste of natural resources became familiar on the Nigerian scene.

The words of this report suggest strongly that such carelessness was peculiar to Nigeria. It suggests that Nigerians developed a unique negative orientation towards the economy. It is this same canker worm that motivated the military president Ibrahim Babagida to establish MAMSER (the directorate for social mobilization). At the inauguration ceremony, he made it clear that: it aimed principally at the eradication of all those features of our behavior in the past which have made our society a by word for disharmony, dishonesty, distrust and disservice, and a haven for those who prefer to embrace and to promote in their conduct the least attractive traits in human nature; it is to raise our individual and collective National consciousness.....to rediscover the meaning of duty and to accept responsibility to pursue honest endeavors and to take pride in personal advance only through dedication and hard work.

Among the general populace of Nigeria, it is common to hear people allude to government property as no one's special responsibility. It has also become language among civil servants that "government work is carried behind (at the occipital region) not on the forehead". This simply implies that it is stupid to work for the 'government' as though one is working for him or herself. No wonder in many government agencies today, staff discipline has become a mirage.

The concrete expression of the foregoing is captured by Ejiofor (1999) in his evaluation of the performance of 44 government owned companies in four sectors from 1995-1999.

Table 1.1: Summary of performance assessment for 44 government owned Companies in 4 sectors (1995-1999)

Sector	No	Aggregate income in N millions	Aggregate expense in N millions	Aggregate profit/loss N millions	Performance Results %
Agro-business	11	43.85	65.00	-21.15	-48.2
Finance Invest	11	219.02	181.62	+27.40	+13.1
Manufacturing	10	67.44	69.40	-1.98	-2.9
service	12	810.82	657.36	+145.46	+17.8
					20.2%

Table 1.2: Summary of Ratio of profit to sale () in 44 G.C.Os in Nigeria form 1995-1999

Sector						Mean
Agro-business	-200.74	-56.88	-47.42	-26.53	-23.19	-70.7
Finance/investment	+8.93	+6.96	+11.70	+16.19	+16.19	+11.9
Manufacturing	-15.72	-55	-1.59	6.27	-6.27	-4.2
Service	-29.97	-71.9	+24.43	+22.94	+22.94	+8.1
Net effect	-238.04	-57.68	-12.99	+8.99	+8.99	-55.1%

From the information supplied in Table 1.1, it is clear that government owned business were unable to recover 20 of their costs for the period 1995-1999, the worst hit being the agro-business sectors which recorded a loss of about 50.

Table 1.2 shows that on the average, government owned companies loose more than 55 per annum, there is also a progressive increase in losses from 1995 to 1999.

This trend has not reversed, instead, the margin has continued to widen from 1995 to date, hence the recent experiences with government owned businesses which have culminated in accelerate privatization efforts by the Obasanjo administration. I want to state here also that what applied to those companies is applicable to everything organized by government in this country, the local government inclusive.

Indeed, several local governments have had repeated cases of irresponsible leadership, which has lead to decayed infracture, improperly kept inventories and abuse of property in superlative terms.

ii. DEFINITION OF CONSTRUCTS.

a. Management.

Brench (1972), explains that management is concerned with seeing that jobs get done and done efficiently, its tasks all center on decisions for planning and guiding operations that are going on in the enterprise. Nkem (1995), sees management as involving the organization and direction of assets for optional utility, while Nzelibe (1996), implies that management is concerned with identification of needs and ways to actualize them.

From these understandings of management, we can safely infer that management is 'a function bestowed on a person or group, which places such a person or 'group' in a position to "take charge" of any or all factors of production in a given milieu. In relationship to the topic under discussion; We want to take management to mean the effective acquisition of public property, the effective servicing of public property and the effective utilization of public property.

b. Public property

Public property may be defined as any property acquired by use of public funds. Such property funded through 'tax payers money include movable and immovable assets. We can also safely define public property as those property acquired and administered by governments local, state and federal. Indeed, this latter definition seems the most appropriate for the purpose of this paper.

c. Psychology

The usual definition of psychology is 'the scientific study of behavior' (Morah, 1995). It is the scientific study of overt and covert human behaviour; no wonder Skinner argued that psychology as a science of behaviour had arrived at the state where it could, when applied by men of good will, result in developing people to the point where they could all be truly happy, secure, productive, creative, and forward looking, (Bulgelski, 1973).

ii. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION FOR THE ENDEMIC MISMANAGEMENT SYNDROME

We have seen that government property and businesses have not been managed properly. In this section, we want to discourse and examine some human factors in our milieu which impinge on property management. These are personality attributes, attitudes, and dispositions that appear critical in the discharge of management functions peculiar to our environment. Uzoka (2000), identified the externality factor and the factor of other-attribution as very significant essentials in this regard. Other variables include the "Nigerian factor" and mental Health status of managers.

A. EXTERNALITY

The external locus of control orientation is a prominent personality trait among our populace. By locus of control is meant, the extent to which people ascribe or do not ascribe the causation of events in their lives to themselves. While externals attribute events in their lives to chance, God, gods, and other powerful influences, internally oriented persons believe they are the locus (i.e. responsible) for what happens in their lives. Externally oriented persons do not perceive themselves as being 'in charge' of events around them. They prefer to ascribe control to others, thereby feeling helpless, and tend to make minimal efforts to alleviate conditions in which they find themselves.

In the society, such persons become oriented towards magical thinking. They spend much of the time and resources available to them in non-intellective approaches to problems such as consulting native doctors, prayer houses and the like, blaming relations, voodoo, and government for all negative effects they experience.

Such people in school prefer to do night vigils in prayer houses asking holy ghost fire to deal their perceived enemies and lecturers (who fail them) instead of burning the mid-night oil' over the same period. As managers, they avoid directive charge, hard decisions where necessary, and are inclined to passing the 'ruck all the time to external persons or events. They fault other people. spend time with witch doctors seeking retaliation against perceived enemies who are 'fighting them'. Hosted (1990), posits that the externality orientation is cultural bound among Africans.

B. RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION

Close to and probably arising from the concept of locus of control and its derivative of magical thinking is the issue of the attribution of responsibility, i.e. attribution of responsibility for action of an individual either to himself or to other persons (Uzoka, 2000). In his study, Uzoka (1982), found that there is a high degree of attribution of responsibility away from self, for example in our milieu, a child who breaks a plate.....would normally report: 'the plate has broken' or try to tell a long tale of how the plate got broken. While a western child in the same condition would just report to his/her mother 'I have broken this plate'. In much the same manner, We hear students say of their exam results 'the man gave me 'f not that' I failed the course. The same way, workers blame their supervisors for poor performance appraisals even when they default. What we are saying here is that a large percentage of Africans (Nigerians inclusive) have a penchant for blaming other persons or groups for faults which are very clearly their own.

When people possess the aforementioned attitudinal dispositions they become dependent, they are not pro-active, they avoid taking serious decisions because they would not want to be held responsible for the outcome of such decisions. Such people cannot make good managers. Unfortunately many of such people abound as managers of public property, and local Governments in Nigeria.

C. It is pertinent at the juncture to call attention to the popular slang;

THE NIGERIAN FACTOR

The Nigerian factor is a hydra-headed psychopathology of epidemic prevalence in Nigeria. It is here defined as the pervading negative disposition among Nigerians which makes us not to believe in Nigeria, thus behave as though there is no Nigeria. It is the unbelief in Nigeria that makes Nigerians not to respect the laws of the land nor strive to embrace patriotism, hardwork, fair pay and nationalistic orientation, nor cogitate about 'her' prosperity. It is this negative cognition that brings about the negative actions of Nigerians against Nigeria and fellow Nigerians. Nigerians do not believe that the prosperity of Nigerian is synonymous with the prosperity of Nigerians. They think and act as though the disintegration of Nigeria would benefit them the more.

Here, we have to call to mind the undue emphasis being laid by elite Nigerians on sectional, tribal, religious and clannish components of Nigeria by which they seek to create personal empires for personal gains. It is this Nigerian factor that Achebe (1983), partly described when he stated that since we assumed management of our own affairs we have displayed a consistent inclination to opt for mediocrity and compromise and to pick a third and fourth eleven to play for us. Of this also, President Obasanjo aptly captured the manifestations in his may 1999 address thus: Government Officials became progressively indifferent to propriety of conduct and showed little commitment to promoting the general welfare of the people and public good. Government and all its agencies become thoroughly corrupt and reckless. Members of the public had to bribe their way through in ministries and parastatals to get attention, and one government agency had to bribe another government agency to obtain the release or their statutory allocation of funds.

It is probably safe to assume that President Obasanjo's privatization policy was informed by this state of affairs.

The truth of the foregoing, leaves no doubt that the 'Nigerian factor' has become a cognitive aberration of great destructive consequence in Nigeria today.

D. MENTAL HEALTH:

Nigerian health system managers have not paid due attention to mental health. Most Nigerians are either laissez faire about mental hygiene or completely ignorant of what constitutes mental hygiene. The resultant effect is that many a Nigerian workers who have mental and neurological health problems go about undertaking very tasking duties day by day. Such neurotics, neurological ill and even mildly retarded individuals often ascend positions of high responsibility, where, due to their mental health they can no longer cope with the demands. They try very hard, yet their bests cannot be worthwhile. Invariably, the organization or sections of organizations or governments headed by such persons suffer immense carelessness and mismanagement.

We should also make mention of the pressures of our work environment, which in many cases are distressing. There may be lack of accommodation, inconsistent supply of electricity, and poor equipment, as well as negative effects of some policies like the quota system. These and the like, create stress, which is incompatible with high productivity and efficient management.

IV. REMEDIALS

We have seen from the previous paragraphs that poor handling of government property is a direct consequences of cognitive and psycho-social aberration. Many Nigerians do not believe that Nigeria (or better the government) is not alien to them and is an inseparable part of their everyday existence. This situation could be bettered by adopting the following strategies.

a. COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

By cognitive restructuring, the psychologist means the process of changing the thought processes of humans. It is a cognitive stress reduction approach that involves attempts to detect, dispute, and change maladaptive or irrational ideas that trigger negative emotion and behaviour (Pesser and Smith, 2001). The 'thinking' of Nigerians in most cases have been shown to predispose them to actions inimical to collective prosperity. There is need therefore for the fallacy of such (present) 'thinking' to be exposed and changed with a more rational option. This shall be done in groups such as schools, special institutions, professional bodies' workshops, and the like. The technicalities of this 'therapy' is not within the scope of this paper, it therefore suffices to say that we generally have to change our beliefs about government and government property and begin to look at them as our own belongings, which need to be handled carefully so that we may reap their full 'harvest' and our brothers and sisters after us may also benefit.

In this regard, I am constrained to ask the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to get to work and justify her existence.

b. SPECIAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR MANAGERS.

The word 'special' is used here to show that the training being advocated is not for academic enhancement like the continuing education programmes. What we are calling for here is such

training that would expose the managers thoroughly to the damage they do to themselves and their generations unborn when they are careless about public (government) property. Such managers should be trained by qualified psychologists and behaviour modification experts. I do recommend that all senior civil and public servants from the local governments upward have to partake in such training so that, such officers will internalize the positive attitudes and values, thus exhibit positive managerial behaviours without coercion.

c. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCREENING OF APPOINTABLE OFFICERS/MANAGERS

As we saw earlier in this paper, certain psychological traits inhibit proper managerial functions. It would therefore be worthwhile to psychologically screen potential managers of public utilities so that those who possess negative dispositions as well as those who are not mentally healthy should not be made to handle government property. I want to add here that managers in my thinking of the public and civil service are all persons categorized as senior servants. If this is adopted, it means that promotions to certain positions of responsibility can only be attained by individuals who are psychologically fit.

d. MENTAL HEALTH HYGIENE

It is becoming increasingly expedient that mental health practices be properly integrated in the nations health care delivery system. To this end, all hospitals should be made to have a psychological clinic as a primary condition before registration. All senior civil/ public servants and all political appointees should be made to attend psychological check-ups just as they attend medical check-ups. The essence of this is that prophylactic mental health practice must be pursued vigorously, otherwise, in a short time, Nigerian work force may be hit hard by poor mental health.

e. REWARD AND PUNISHMENT.

Psychologists have long discovered the effect of reinforcements on attitude change- (Wrightsmann 1977). It is therefore suggested that in line with such findings, officers who take good care of government property entrusted in their care should be rewarded, as means of motivation. Such rewards should be worked out in such a manner that they carry social values. On the other hand, officers who perform badly should be punished first, that they may improve, secondly that other people do not emulate them. In this regard, the anti-corruption commission must possess the tiger claws but with human face.

V. CONCLUSION

We have seen that 'government' belongs to nobody' is a popular view held among Nigerians and that government enterprises are consequently poorly managed. We have also seen that some prevalent characteristic traits in our culture like externality and attribution of responsibility away from self inhibit the ability of many persons to take bold steps, initiatives

and or responsibility for their actions, thus impinging on their managerial abilities. We also saw that poor mental health is a major contributory factor in this regard.

The reason why public property is not administered properly is that the present psychological frame of Nigerians is inconsistent with 'corporate' development. It is only through cognitive' restructuring of the populace, special training programmes for senior civil and public servants, psychological screening of prospective managers, popularization of prophylactic mental health practices, and application of reinforcements (rewards), and punishment, that the present ugly situation prevalent in governments owned enterprises can be changed for better. A case is therefore made for adequate involvement of psychologists in all spheres of our national life.

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