

EXECUTIVE PERFORMANCE

8 Keys to Enrich Your Corporate Game and Productivity

A Focus on the Ugandan Corporate Leader

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Chapter 2:

It takes 4 Ugandans...

On 1st July 2010, the then Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki officially launched the East African Common Market Protocol, which opened the way for the free movement of labour, capital, goods and services within the East African Community (EAC). The EAC is an intergovernmental organization comprising five countries: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

With the advent of the free movement of labour, perception of the productivity of labour becomes a significant factor because employers in competitive sectors tend to opt for the human resource they perceive to be best value for money. There has been a perception that productivity of Ugandans at the workplace is relatively low compared to other countries in the EAC¹. Considering that Uganda is part of the EAC, there is a danger that Ugandans will lose out on top corporate assignments.

“Corporate organizations in Uganda choose to face the extra cost and administration burden of hiring expatriates because expatriates are perceived to perform better than Ugandans”

My involvement with top private and non-governmental organizations over the past 20 years reveals that increasingly, non-Ugandans are running a number of big organizations in Uganda. Indeed, using the list of organizations in the study I carried out as an example, 9 out of the 17 organizations (53%) are headed by non-Ugandans. The organizations

represented are a cross-section of the top employers in Uganda. Surely if 50% of top private and international non-government organizations prefer non-Ugandan top executives, there is a problem. In neighbouring countries, a similar sample would show more nationals occupying the top jobs. Corporate organizations in Uganda choose to face the extra cost, and administration burden, of hiring expatriates because expatriates are perceived to perform better than Ugandans.

Indeed, this problem has also been recognized at the National level (National Planning Authority 2010) and is specifically addressed under the plans for mass capacity and skills development and, the improvement of performance management systems in the National Development Plan (NDP).

The NDP outlines a range of strategies, mainly targeting rural masses, to uplift capacity and skills development of different categories of people that are the priority for the national government, such as: the unemployed youth, women and people with disabilities.

However, in the NDPs published so far, there are no interventions specifically directed at improving productivity and performance of corporate executives within the private sector and Non-Government establishments.

These strategic documents (the NDPs) have so far not included coaching as an intervention for low productivity or any other of the listed challenges. However, at a global level *executive coaching* has been observed to be an effective performance enhancement intervention for leaders², although it is little known among Ugandan corporate executives and policy makers.

FACING THE REALITY

A common citation among many motivational speakers in Uganda is “*It takes 4 Ugandans to do what 1 Kenyan can do*”. There have been heated debates in many circles especially where some Ugandans are coming up in defence of their work ethic. This view

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or assumption has found intrigue in many spheres in Uganda. Some of the Top Managers that I have worked with have that general view that Ugandans are poor performers.

Ugandans are considered to be the laziest people in East Africa with the lowest labour productivity in terms of its value-added per worker³.

In fact, the World Economic Forum (2014) ranks Uganda’s labour productivity in position number 126 out of 144 countries. Further, in Table 1, I give a comparative ranking to position Uganda’s productivity within the East African region.

Table 1: Labour Market Efficiency–Pay and Productivity Ranking⁴

Country	Value	Rank/144
Kenya	4.1	56
Rwanda	4.0	68
Tanzania	3.3	122
Uganda	3.2	126

As shown in Table 1, compared to other countries within the East African Region, Uganda has the lowest labour productivity. The Government of Uganda also acknowledges that: ‘*Addressing*

labour productivity and opportunity remains a major challenge for the Ministry [Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development] and the Government as a whole”

“People do not want to perform and I do not know how to make them perform...”

It is important to note that the level or quality of performance in Uganda is, among other things, informed by the work ethics, which is rooted in the cultural environment in which Ugandans are socialized.

In fact, the World Economic Forum lists ‘poor work ethic in the national labour force’ as number seven (out of sixteen) of the most problematic factors for doing business in Uganda (and business is usually about productivity⁶).

The poor work ethic in both private and public sectors have a historical trace from the 1960s:

“Uganda has witnessed persistent poor employee performance in public organizations since mid-60s, which researchers attribute to the 1966/67 crisis and the political turmoil of the early 70s up to mid-80s. **Despite government’s effort to avert the crisis by introducing reforms to improve employee performance, the situation has not improved**”.⁷ [Emphasis mine]

From the point of view of individual employers in the Ugandan labour market, one expatriate client complained: *‘I have tried all the rules in the book to get my executives to deliver results and nothing seems to work’*. Another client, a Ugandan, from a Higher Education Institution had turned down an opportunity to be promoted to senior management level within her department

before I met her in a coaching session. She told me that: *‘people do not want to perform and I do not know how I can make them perform. It is so difficult to change their attitudes towards work; they want to be paid for work not done’*. Performance at the work place is a challenge irrespective of sector, industry or employee category.

STEMMING THE TIDE

Uganda has been striving to develop economically over the past 50 years, since independence in 1962. With a population of 34.9 million people and per capita income at USD 506, about USD 1.39 a day, **Uganda is classified as an underdeveloped country**⁸.

Among the most critical challenges Uganda is facing is the *low productivity of its labour-force* and therefore, there is a drive to increase productivity in order to eradicate poverty. In fact, Uganda’s planning authority reports that, *‘Uganda is faced with low labour productivity levels with a total factor productivity index of less than a unit compared to the global competitiveness standard of at least five units’*⁹. There are also documented policies and strategies that are hoped to enhance poverty eradication by 2040. This drive towards poverty eradication is further documented in the National Vision Statement: **‘A**

“Probably the biggest question would be... ‘...are the interventions and strategic focus in stemming the tide of low productivity in Uganda yielding any benefits?’”

transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years¹⁰.

Movement from peasant to modern economy calls for strategies to improve labour productivity. The Ugandan government is focusing on removing the critical barriers to

productivity through skills development, curriculum and education system change, infrastructure development, and performance tools. Among the number of strategies that are being employed towards improving labour productivity is massive skills development and re-deployment of human resources into modern export-oriented goods and services, and the private sector¹¹. In addition, these strategies target rural communities and youths because they form the majority of the working population.

Probably, the biggest question on people's lips would be "Is the government doing enough?" Are these interventions and strategic focus in stemming the tide of low productivity in Uganda yielding any benefits? Is there any indication of progress that can be seen coming from the efforts that the Government is putting in place? Is this the correct focus in the first place?

A LOOK AT THE ROOTS

Since there are indications that the performance problem is also rooted in the history and traditions of the peoples of Uganda, it is important to shade some light on the cultural dimension of performance. The cultural orientation (one's beliefs and total way of life) plays an important role in shaping perceptions and work ethics¹².

"Ugandan work ethic requires people, including corporate executives, at all levels to apply these characteristics, collectively called *Ubuntu*"

Uganda has a wide diversity of cultures originating from many different African peoples: Bantu, Sudanese, Nilotics and Nilo-Hamites¹³. As would be expected in such a diverse community, there are many languages (at least 45) and numerous dialects¹⁴. While Ugandans have different languages and cultures, there are some

common elements that cut across most ethnic groups. For example, all cultures promote obedience, respectfulness, friendliness, politeness, calmness, and patience with other people, *and most especially, the elders.*

Ugandan work ethic requires people, including corporate executives, at all levels to apply these characteristics, collectively called *Ubuntu*.

‘Ubuntu is a term commonly used within Bantu languages in East, Southern, and Central Africa to refer to a worldview or philosophical approach to human relationships that elevates the importance of humanness and shared community’

– Brubaker (2013:101)

The concept developed out of the need to depend upon, and support, each other¹⁵. In its use within management, Ubuntu is often conceptualized based on five social values¹⁶:

- a) Survival,
- b) Spirit of solidarity,
- c) Compassion,
- d) Respect and dignity

Further, ‘Ubuntu is associated with kindness, gentleness, humility, respect and love¹⁷. For example, it is not uncommon to get staff taking a day off because a neighbour has lost a close family member. A person with Ubuntu is expected to treat his or her neighbours as they would a member of their family.

‘In business environments, Ubuntu may be expressed through open-handedness and concern for the needs and interests of others in the organization’¹⁸. In summary, Ubuntu is considered to be ‘an excellent African quality’¹⁹

While Ubuntu values may have advantages for performance, there are many traditions and practices in Uganda that do not support the conceptualization of performance which focuses on optimizing results.

Some of these beliefs and practices are evident in proverbs, sayings and tales, (among other cultural archives) which are passed

“When people try to be different they are seen as rebels or people that are showing off, a behavior that is criticized and shunned. In other words, creativity and innovation and hard work do not trump taboos and culture!”

on from one generation to another. An example of such a saying is that among the Baganda (of central Uganda): *‘Nkole mpoomye; Nalunga yagoya amayuni,’* literally meaning, in an effort to be creative, Nalunga went to the extent of mashing yams, yet among the Baganda yams are not mashed. Nalunga was a king’s concubine who wanted to be different, or creative, by changing the way of cooking and ended up committing a taboo. When people

try to be different they are seen as rebels or people that are showing off, a behaviour that is criticized and shunned. In other words, creativity and innovation and hard work do not trump taboos and culture!

CULTURE VS. PERFORMANCE IN UGANDA

Further, elders, leaders or generally people in authority are considered to be all-knowing and their views are highly regarded. Another saying among the Baganda illustrates this point: *‘Etemwa omukulu: tenyiigirwa.* What is decided by legitimate authority [or an elder]: is not resented by the subjects²⁰. This saying suggests that subordinates should implement their superiors’ decisions without question. Yet, another saying goes: *‘Akulebera: y’akuwa amagezi.* He who walks in front (of you): gives you wisdom²¹.

“Generally, Ugandans are socialized to trust in the ability of the leader to provide guidance and so, employees tend to believe that as long as they are following the leader, performance is guaranteed. Therefore, performance in the Ugandan cultural setting is understood as doing whatever one is told to do and respectfully following the guidance of leaders; which is performance by instruction!”

Moreover, another proverb says: ‘*Omutaka akulembedde: nti mnaabula?*’ Meaning that for as long as you are following the leader, you should not worry about getting lost²². **Through these proverbs, the Baganda emphasize the dependence on leaders or elders for wisdom and decision-making.**

Generally, Ugandans are socialized to trust in the ability of the leader to provide guidance and so, employees tend to believe that as long as they are following the leader, performance is guaranteed. Therefore, performance in the Ugandan cultural setting is understood as doing whatever one is told to do and respectfully following the guidance of leaders; which is performance by instruction.

However, many corporate leaders do not appreciate performance by instruction; they would rather have staff that takes the initiative to perform without being instructed. There seems to be a mismatch between the cultural idea of performance and the corporate understanding of performance.

Plaister-Ten (2015) refers to *coaching* (which is an example of a performance management intervention) as having emerged from a western culture that has a tendency towards goal and performance-orientation. And yet, the Ubuntu cultural values primarily focus on people’s feelings and maintaining social harmony. Performance, in form of results delivery, is therefore a

“The challenge for leaders in the Ugandan setting therefore is how to express Ubuntu while enforcing performance and, sustaining that balance. When such a balance happens, leaders get a place in the ‘hearts and minds of their employees’ However, if not controlled and if results are not emphasized, Ubuntu may have a negative effect on performance”

foreign concept to many Ugandans and in many ways it is perceived to be inhumane (lacking Ubuntu).

The challenge for leaders in the Ugandan setting therefore is how to express Ubuntu while enforcing performance and, sustaining that balance. When such a balance happens, leaders get a place in the ‘hearts and minds of their employees’²³ However, if not controlled and if results are not emphasized, Ubuntu may have a negative effect on performance.

From the cultural and social perspectives of the Ugandan culture, performance mainly depends on the leaders’ ability to make the right decisions and give the right instructions in a humane manner.

In addition, performance takes into account the common good of a community and feelings of the performer. However, considering changing times and expectations, the traditional ‘all-knowing’ and humane leader that directs an obedient work-force may not be the way forward to enhancing performance.

THE CULTURE OF TIME MANAGEMENT

Another cultural aspect that affects the performance of Ugandans is time management. In Uganda, time is a period; it is a range, not a point. One of the common challenges that my clients present is staff not keeping deadlines. For a manager to say that one has not performed because he or she did not keep the deadline is considered as being malicious, petty and extremely unreasonable.

Even in ordinary life, outside business, it is common for someone to be 2 hours late for an appointment and still expect the person with whom the appointment was made to be waiting. The person that comes late would do as much, so they expect the same from others. Addressing time management misconceptions takes a lot of effort.

WAY FORWARD

Having established the work culture in the Ugandan Corporate setting, it is imperative that we offer the much needed solution. In the chapters and pages that follow, I intend to clearly show that when appropriate interventions (including models, tools and techniques) are used to address performance obstacles and strengthen the executives' ability towards the determinants, executive performance will be enhanced.

Looking at the roots of the performance problem in Uganda, it is clear that for considerable change to be made, the intervention must of necessity be a 'Top-down' approach. This means that one of the areas of focus for intervention has to be the Corporate Executives in Uganda. If we can come up with tools, models and principles that can help them increase their leadership and performance, then we in turn are able to affect the people that they are leading. A more pronounced change therefore will infiltrate the corporate organizations, much like it was for Margaret and the Media Company.

A QUICK RECAP

1. Corporate organizations in Uganda choose to face the extra cost, and administration burden, of hiring expatriates because expatriates are perceived to perform better than Ugandans.
2. There are no interventions specifically directed at improving productivity and performance of corporate

executives within the private sector and Non-Government establishments.

3. Compared to other countries within the East African Region, Uganda has the lowest labour productivity
4. The level or quality of performance in Uganda is, among other things, informed by the work ethics, which is rooted in the cultural environment in which Ugandans are socialized.
5. Ugandan work ethic requires people, including corporate executives, at all levels to apply the characteristics, collectively called *Ubuntu*
6. The challenge for leaders in the Ugandan setting is how to express *Ubuntu* while enforcing performance and, sustaining that balance.

¹ (Baguma 2010; Ssemogerere 2005)

² (ICF Turkey Chapter 2014; Lawless 2009)

³ Baguma 2010

⁴ Data source: Global Competitiveness Report (2014: 233, 323, 359, 371,

377) (Schwab, 2014)

⁵ (Office of the Prime Minister 2012:14).

⁶ (2014:370)

⁷ Kyamanywa (2011:15)

⁸ (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2014: 6, 13).

⁹ (National Planning Authority 2015: 65)

¹⁰ (Uganda Government n.d.:3)

¹¹ (National Planning Authority 2010)

¹² (also noted in Ernst and Chrobot-Mason 2011).

¹³ (Trowell and Waschmann 1953).

¹⁴ (Jjinga 2011).

¹⁵ (Gade 2011: 317).

¹⁶ (Brubaker 2013:101).

¹⁷ (Mayer 1980 cited in Gade 2011:309)

¹⁸ Brubaker (2013: 101)

¹⁹ (Davis, et al.1936cited in Gade 2011:308).

²⁰ (Walser 1982, Proverb no.1798)

²¹ (Walser 1982, Proverb no.291)

²² (Walser 1982, Proverb no.4337).

²³ Nkomo and Kriek (2004: 87)