

HRD Forum — Viewpoint

HRD in Africa: Challenges and Dilemmas

Fostine Opiyo Odhiambo, formerly Group HR, Training & Development Director for the Turkys Group, Zanzibar, in interview with Rick Holden, Editor, IJHRDPP&R

Fostine is an HR professional with over 11 years' experience. Professionally qualified with a BCOM (HRM) from KCA University — Kenya, a Higher National Diploma in HRM from The Kenya Polytechnic University College and a Diploma in PM from the Railway Training Institute (RTI) Kenya. He began his HR career in 2007. He worked with Moorgate Ltd — a company operating restaurants and casinos in Kenya and Congo where, in due course, Fostine became Regional HR Manager. After five years with Moorgate Ltd. he moved to the Turkys Group of Companies based in Zanzibar with several branches in Tanzania and Comoros. It is an organization with over 3,000 employees, operating in a wide range of sectors — hotels, oil and gas, healthcare, cement production, beverage production and bottling, real estate, marine transport and telecommunications. At Turkys, Fostine became Group HR, Training & Development Director. Whilst a major role with the Turkys Group of companies was to establish an HR function, where this was often totally absent, human resource development has been at the heart of Fostine's professional practice. "People are number 1 number 2 and number 3." Currently Fostine is leading Frei Associates, East Africa Ltd., a company championing for Employee-Employer Branding within East Africa.

Talent Development

To begin our discussion, I ask Fostine to reflect on his corporate practice experience. He identifies what he feels has been, and indeed remains, a major challenge to the effective practice of HRD in Africa. He highlights what he refers to as workforce anxiety. In his experience a majority of the workforce, particularly at middle/senior levels join an organization with aspirations for their future career development. At recruitment and in the early periods of employment new staff are pre-occupied by questions such as "do you have a career plan for me?" and "how will my career be developed in this company?". The anxiety Fostine refers to is a product of a rhetoric-reality problem. Employers, he argues, will invariably make the right noises and promises. But the reality is different. An ambiguity in the position taken by employers is highlighted.

Employers will always say yes 'we will help you to develop your career'. But is it the truth? ... I can confidently say that it is not ... Yes, they are in a situation where they must 'fight for talent', yet they are often unprepared to offer appropriate development opportunities to help retain talent.

A concern, still highly prevalent in most African organizations, is the fear of talented individuals being poached by competitors. A mindset change is needed so that employers engender a culture which seeks to match expectations rather than perpetuating a climate of anxiety and distrust.

Fostine discusses his approach to this challenge and how he has sought to develop his HRD practice in the context of this tension. It has involved work at two principal levels. Firstly, at an individual level, where Fostine throughout his career at Turkys and despite the geographical challenges, has tried to get alongside key staff, get close to them, understand their needs and aspirations. This is a clear rebuff to the ‘normal’, hierarchical ways of doing things. “To bridge this gap, I need to get their trust; they need to see me not as a manager to be feared but as someone with whom a collaboration can be established, albeit recognizing organizational goals and objectives etc.” I am puzzled why this is not the role of the line manager in any organization but Fostine alerts me to prevailing perceptions about ‘management’ and ‘managing’ in Africa. The hierarchy instils a culture of fear; one’s manager is someone who tells you what to do. They are not a coach or a mentor interested in your progression and development.

A second level of focus has been at the most senior levels of the organization. This has meant engaging with the politics of HRD. Globally, the function has faced and continues to face something of an uphill struggle to establish a presence and have power and influence. Fostine’s experience resonates closely with the research and accounts of practice in the West. Fostine expands upon two aspects of practice which has helped him convince the most senior levels of an organization to raise the profile of HRD and ensure appropriate positioning and resourcing.

Policy principles

Clear HR policy principles need to be established to provide the framework and basis for an organization to operate successfully and to avoid keep making the same mistakes. But the distinctiveness of Fostine’s approach has been to engrain HRD into all such policy. In any HR manual resulting from the establishment of key policy principles, HRD is emphasized and championed. An example is drawn from the healthcare sector. A nurse recruited into a position of a general nurse expresses interest in developing in to a specialism. This is recognized and addressed. “The organization will help you pursue this interest, give you the opportunities to develop in this area whilst guaranteeing your existing job. Another example relates to training for expatriates — ensuring that a sensitivity to the local workforce and their culture is implemented at the outset of any expatriate’s employment. The training and development policy that Fostine established emphasized a proactive education assistance plan that provided opportunities for job related personal development through participation in professional, managerial, technical, and vocational courses for both long and short duration as a means to encourage, support, and accord effective HRD practices.

Assessment

An understanding of an individual’s career aspirations and interests has been fundamental to Fostine’s HRD practice.

When you hire someone you don’t know the employee well enough, he/she may have the paper qualifications but you don’t really know them, you don’t know their expectations, their attitudes, their character ... once they join the team you have to assess this carefully ... this level of assessment is still lacking in most organizations today.

Critical here is use of self-appraisal and regular team based appraisal involving immediate supervisor, line manager and HRD. The emphasis is upon development and this shift in emphasis is something Fostine introduced and implemented in several companies within the Turkys Group. This is not a 'quick fix'; it is something that takes two to three years to embed and see the benefits. It represents an important change in practice, signalling a different emphasis and focus for performance management. It is unquestionably time consuming but absolutely worthwhile in terms of developing and strengthening a culture where there is trust around a development agenda.

The organizational benefits of such interventions are not seen overnight. But Fostine points to impact two to three years down the line sufficient to convince the CEO of the Turkys Group, even if one or two of the other Board Directors remained sceptical! Furthermore, a level of success on these two 'fronts', Fostine argues, sets the groundwork and paves the way to begin work on shifting the 'management syndrome' and how, over time, to develop managers to be coaches and to bring HRD into their scope of activity.

As a champion of HRD, Fostine developed his own model: **AKOBRA**. This seeks to capture a fit between employer and its employees. The model emphasizes how to become an employer of choice and employee of choice by aligning core steps that includes: **A**ssessing the organization/self; focusing on **K**ey Business Issues; **O**penness to change; **B**elieving in your organization/self; **R**eacting (taking action); and conducting **A**chievement assessment. Whilst championing a particular approach to HRD Fostine acknowledges a problem in his own HRD practice; one which reflects the tension between inclusive and exclusive talent development. His heart says inclusive and as we will see shortly Fostine has strong views on the need of local workforce talent development. But the reality of his situation in dealing mostly with middle and senior level employees requires acknowledgement that only a few will rise to positions which can drive an organization's performance to new levels. By implication, it is to these individuals that most attention must be devoted.

The Africa Syndrome

The discussion shifts to look at HRD in Africa more widely. Whilst accepting that it is dangerous to regard a continent of 54 countries as somehow homogenous, nonetheless Fostine believes there are certain key problems which are sufficiently generic to warrant inclusion in a HRD agenda for Africa. He argues these are captured by what he calls the 'African Syndrome'; a prevailing dependency upon expatriate labour to fill key positions in specialist occupational areas and in middle and senior management. Fostine explains that in his view a majority of African organizations still believe that a good CEO, for example, should come from the West, a financial controller from India and so on.

Expatriates come with good knowledge and experience but they also come with a different culture and they forget that where they are now there is an existing culture ... how people expect to be handled ... they do not give sufficient attention to the culture they are joining.

He is uncompromising in his disparagement of the assumptions and attitudes of many expatriates recruited.

They view Africans as fools ... expatriates brought in on the assumption that Africa lacks such

talent ... there is nobody fit for it. But is that the truth? ... it is not the truth. There are brains within Africa that can perform better than the foreigners ...

In particular, Fostine records his frustration at the implication of this for HRD in Africa. “There is a neglect of local talent. The talent is there, what is lacking is experience ... it needs developing.”

The problem is not restricted to expatriates from overseas. Fostine argues that certain countries in Africa have a reputation for particular skills; for example, Kenya hospitality and healthcare; Egypt and Zimbabwe engineering; South Africa technology and IT. This means countries prefer to move outside of their own labour market and recruit for particular skills from across African borders. The implication is the same though, a neglect of local talent ... particularly in the poorer (and often war torn) African nations such as Sudan, Somalia, Congo.

African Solutions for Africa

The HRD agenda in Africa, Fostine argues, is multifaceted and will vary country by country. But he points to three fundamental pathways of action which are needed.

Firstly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, educational reform is identified as fundamental. “Too many African young people finish high school with no idea of what they want to do nor the skills with which to join the labour force.” Fostine acknowledges change is happening in Kenya, albeit slowly. The system is moving towards a much greater acknowledgment of the need for assessment of competencies. This reflects a recognition of the need for vocational education and training but needs to be given even greater emphasis within the curriculum. Linked with this is a call for entrepreneurship education and training — particularly in relation to unemployed young people. The majority of youths need to be encouraged to take artisan courses as this is an area with a greater gap that can accommodate more unemployed youths. Fostine adds up by saying that much emphasis is needed on career development systems in Africa.

At a corporate level there is the need for HRD to emerge and develop distinct from HRM.

HRD has not emerged as sufficiently distinct from HRM ... in my experience in most organizations it is still working under HRM. In many organizations a very narrow perspective prevails in relation to HR — it’s about hiring and firing. We need to recognize this ... HRD needs to be a stand-alone department and it needs to be given priority ... a distinct budget. It needs full recognition at Board level; It is the people that will drive organizational success and this can only happen in Africa if local talent is developed through the plans and actions of an HRD department.

Fostine believes South Africa has made most progress in this respect — with, he reckons, about 30% of companies adopting such practice. Kenya he considers is about 10% and Tanzania 3% but for most it is pretty much zero. (The exceptions of course are those multi national companies with a presence in Africa but who are not ‘African’ organizations.)

Relatedly, a lack of professionalism is identified as a major barrier preventing the emergence of a strong and influential HRD function. Kenya, he feels, is something of an exception. He points to the Institute of HRM (IHRM) in Kenya which coordinates the activities and oversees the interests of all qualified and registered Human Resource Professionals in Kenya. It draws its mandate from the Human Resource Management Professionals Act No 52 of 2012; which provides the statutory backing for all human resource practitioners in Kenya to be certified for

them to practice. The body is influential in relation to national HRD policy and practice and at a corporate level; for example, in relation to the promotion of standards, the professional curriculum etc. More than anything, though, the IHRM is a Kenyan body working to develop the Kenyan workforce. Whilst there may be collaboration with bodies like the UK based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development or the US based Association for Talent Development, both actively seeking global influence, there is no dependency on such bodies. It is an institute which is seeking to foster and develop African HR solutions for Africa.

We finish on the topic of unemployment, noting the 2016 ILO report¹ which warned that “Africa, the world’s youngest region, continues to be confronted with high levels of unemployment, vulnerable employment and working poverty with little signs of potential recovery.” Rising levels of youth unemployment is particularly concerning. Fostine returns to points made earlier indicating that enhanced levels of entrepreneurship education and review of career development systems in Africa can make a difference; both in terms of employability and in terms of the creation of new jobs. But he stresses again that it is has to be locally based solutions. “African solutions for African problems.”

Note

ILO, 2016; World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Youth.

