

# **HRM AND THE COMMITMENT RHETORIC: CHALLENGES FOR AFRICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The commitment of employees is obviously desirable in organisations. This paper attempts to highlight some contemporary issues in the commitment research as it relates to HRM. A comparative evaluation of the meaning of commitment as espoused by academics and managers was also made. Some African empirical evidence were reported and examined with their implications for managerial practice discussed. The paper finally identifies certain contemporary issues that should be of interest for managerial practice, and perhaps, guide future research given the realities of the African situation.

**KEY WORDS:** Commitment; Employees; Managers; Human Resource Management and Africa

## **INTRODUCTION**

Western management concepts and writings have dominated the thinking of academics and managers in Africa for a long time. Such writings have not shown how culture might be taken into account in the managerial practice. Many Africans would claim that there are indigenous management practices in Africa. However, like many other managerial theories and practices, very little effort have been made in scientifically testing these “indigenous” positions or synthesising them into a body of knowledge for the purpose of a truly indigenous African management practice that will take into consideration the peculiarity of the African situation and have significant appeal for the average African manager.

Africans, for example, have been skilful managers, have a systemic approach based on historical and practical experience to solving human problems, and often strove to move from the real to the ideal (Osuntokun, 2001). Moreover, it is a fact that Africans have their own values, which are strong and enduring, and this is perhaps why European imprints could not permanently remove these values and ideals in spite of colonialism and western influence on the continent over the years. In reality, regardless of the English, French, Spanish and Portuguese spoken by mainly the elites in Africa, western culture has remained phoney in most part of Africa. The need to understand the values of the average African worker who are the teeming majority of employees that the African manager – local or foreign – must deal with is thus imperative.

The purpose of this paper is to do the following:

1. Identify and highlight some of the contemporary issues in commitment research particularly as it relates to HRM.
2. Examine a few issues beyond the rhetoric of academics and practitioners. For example, how can the parties learn more about commitment from each other?
3. Examine some empirical evidence from Africa and identify what lessons research findings portend for practitioners.

Organisational commitment continues to be a topical issue in management research and it continues to draw the attention of the practicing manager. Several authors in human resource management (HRM) hold up the craving for employee commitment (Bratton and Gold, 1999; Guest, 1995, 1998; and Beardwell and Holden, 1997). Committed employee behaviour is at the heart of HRM and is a central feature that distinguishes HRM from traditional personnel management (Guest, 1995; Storey, 1995; and Tyson, 1995). Thus, the commitment of employees is obviously an area of interest in HRM, the assumption being that employee commitment enhances performance and invariable organisational effectiveness.

When individuals work in organisations they manifest any of two categories of affect or attitude.

1. Those who love their jobs but hate the organisation for which they work.
2. Those who hate their jobs but love their employing organisation, thereby displaying a strong loyalty towards the organisation.

## **THE MEANING OF COMMITMENT**

### **Academics’ view on the meaning of commitment**

In the literature, there are two contending viewpoints: the Mowday *et al.* Model and the Allen and Meyer Model.

### ***The Mowday, Porter and Steers Model***

This view is espoused in several works – Mowday, *et al.* (1979, 1982), Porter, *et al.* (1974). According to this model, which has dominated operationalisation of the concept and has stood for over three decades, organisational commitment has three components: A strong belief in and acceptance of organisational goals and values (IDENTIFICATION). A willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation (INVOLVEMENT) and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation (LOYALTY).

This view, however, goes beyond just a definition, as the emergent Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) from these writers has indeed remained perhaps the most widely used instrument to measure the construct. In fact, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) noted that 103 of 174 studies they investigated used the OCQ. This instrument has continued to be used and indeed the figures reported by Mathieu and Zajac may actually be an underestimation of today's literature output.

### ***Allen and Meyer Model***

This model strongly emerged as an alternative viewpoint to the Mowday, *et al.* model. It was proposed both as an alternative definition and measurement. It emerged from several works, notably Allen and Meyer (1990); Meyer and Allen (1991); Meyer, *et al.* (1993); Meyer (1997); and Meyer and Allen (1997). According to this viewpoint organisational commitment is the feeling of obligation to stay with the organisation: feelings resulting from the internalisation of normative pressures exerted on an individual prior to entry or following entry (Allen and Meyer, 1990). This model identifies three distinct components of organisational commitment:

- a) *Affective commitment*: this is concerned with the extent to which the individual identifies with the organisation (identification, involvement and emotional attachment).
- b) *Continuance commitment*: this concerns the individual's need to continue working for the organisation based on the perceived costs associated with leaving the organisation (calculative). This has been further divided into two by other writers (e.g. Somers, 1993): "*personal sacrifice*" associated with leaving or "*limited opportunities*" for other employment.
- c) *Normative commitment*: refers to commitment that is influenced by society's norms about the extent to which people ought to be committed to the organisation.

In simple terms, people stay with their organisations for three reasons:

- (i) Because they want to (*affective commitment*),
- (ii) Because they need to (*continuance commitment*), or
- (iii) Because they feel they ought to (*normative commitment*).

Based on this view of commitment, a measurement scale originally developed by Allen and Meyer (1990), which attempts to capture these three distinct commitment components, has been used in several studies.

### **Practitioners' view on the meaning of commitment**

Recently, attempts have been made to find out how practitioners perceive and define the construct commitment (e.g. Shepherd and Mathews, 2000; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2000). Whereas Shepherd and Mathews (2000) investigated employers' perceptions of employee commitment and sought to establish if, and how, commitment is measured in practice; Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) interviewed aerospace engineering managers in the U.K. and Sweden to find out what meanings of commitment they generally expressed. The importance

of this particular line of thinking is that it allows comparison of the dominant academic rhetoric of this construct with perspectives from practitioners.

As reported by Singh and Vinnicombe (2000), the following were the most commonly cited as meanings of commitment in work context by practitioners: 1) *Task Delivery* 2) *Putting yourself out* 3) *Involvement* 4) *Quality* and 5) *Hours put in*. The same study revealed that top managers – when compared to the middle and junior ones – expressed the need for active, involved commitment to the organisation and personal career, through being proactive, taking initiative, seeking and taking on challenges, being creative, innovative and adding value to the organisation and to self (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2000). Much as these findings are valuable, there is a significant dual limitation on the study's generalisation. First, the sample comprises only aerospace engineers and, second, it made use of interviews with attendant size restrictions for data collection.

Practitioners acknowledged that committed employees could be distinguished from non-committed ones by their '*attitude*', other factors include: general behaviour, demonstration of job satisfaction, and attendance record, all of which are mentioned by more than 50% of respondents (Shepherd and Mathews, 2000). This is comparable with the Mowday, *et al.* viewpoint. Practitioners placed a high emphasis on communication between themselves and their employees in eliciting and measuring commitment levels. They tend to make use of the following for measuring commitment: 1) *Regular group meetings with management and staff* 2) *Appraisals* 3) *Management by walking around* 4) *Meetings with individual employees* and 5) *Examining absentee levels* (Shepherd and Mathews, 2000). In the measurement of commitment, practitioners do not generally use quantitative instruments like questionnaires; indeed it would seem that they reject it!

The highly communalistic nature of the African society cannot be ignored; hence, African managers are more concerned with interpersonal issues. It will therefore be intriguing to investigate how the average African manager views commitment and how they will measure it among their employees. Again, it would be revealing to know what differences – in such opinion and measurements – (if any) exist between indigenous managers and their expatriate counterparts in the African settings. It is interesting that while the Singh and Vinnicombe (2000) study was qualitative, the study by Shepherd and Mathews (2000) was quantitative. There is obviously need for more studies focusing on practitioners viewpoints using both approaches. This is a challenge for Africa.

### **Some African Data**

Very little empirical work has been reported in Africa on commitment-specific related research. The problem of indigenous African studies in management is further compounded given the vastness and cultural diversity inherent in the continent itself. From the Arab north (which is not monolithic) to the culturally diverse west (with a further Anglophone-Francophone dichotomy and strong ethnic divisions), and the east with a seeming dominance of *Swahili* language but obvious cultural differences; from the ever volatile Congo Basin (and its deep-rooted ethnic strifes and wars) to the relatively more stable south, the story of cultural heterogeneity is the same.

Gbadamosi (1995a) examined the relationship between organisational involvement and some personal correlates (family involvement, morale, career and non-work satisfaction, turnover intention and anxiety) among 110 Nigerian managers. Organisational involvement was measured using Romzek (1989) scale. The scale comprises of positive psychological attachment items emphasizing identification and loyalty towards a work organisation and organisational norms for commitment. The study found organisational involvement to be significantly related to all the variables except family involvement and anxiety. Taken together the variables accounted for about 36 percent of the variance in organisational

involvement. The finding confirms an earlier work by Romzek (1989) in another cultural setting. The findings seem to indicate that the commitment of organisational members, measured by their organisational involvement, have significant positive influences on the functioning of the individual and the organisation.

Another exploratory study had investigated the association among organisational commitment, communication and some behavioural measures of effectiveness (morale, career and non-work satisfaction, turnover intention and anxiety and a four-item alternative measure of effectiveness). Data was obtained from 54 bank managers in Nigeria. The result obtained indicated that organisational commitment measured by the OCQ was strongly related to the behavioural measures of effectiveness. Commitment was only significantly related to the direction of communication of these 16 dimensions of communication examined. Taken together, the measures of behavioural effectiveness used in the study account for 54 percent of the variance in organisational effectiveness. The study argued that the commitment of organisational members certainly has a strong role to play in reinforcing organisational effectiveness (Gbadamosi, 1995b).

Recently, Osuntokun (2001) explores some thoughts on traditional African idea of management as well as the nature of management in Africa in the pre-colonial period. He opines that contrary to the popular view, especially in the western world that ancient African societies carried out their activities without planning, there is overwhelming evidence that systematic patterns were followed for positive results in pre-colonial Africa. He further notes that across the continent, long before European colonialism, careful planning was carried out, and individual and collective resources were sedulously managed for the benefit of all. The various aspects of this process were discussed from a historical perspective. Commitment and mutual obligations stem from group pressures to meet one's promise and to conform to social expectations (Jackson, 2000). Jackson (2000) further proposed instrumentalism-humanism dimension for future African research on indigenous management rather than the more popular developing-developed, Western-African, and public versus private sector dichotomy.

Propositions on the development of an African management theory and practice have largely been intuitive, speculative, and at best strewn and lacking in integration. Similarly, the western views of management in Africa have remained aloof in the African context and settings thereby raising significant cultural questions. Blunt and Jones (1997) however, correctly observed that, we could deduce that while western theories may not always be good for us, the persuasiveness of the message is difficult to resist, particularly in the absence of local alternatives.

## **REFLECTIONS FOR MANAGERIAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The results of research on commitment have several implications for HRM. There are also a number of questions that may agitate the minds of practitioners, which may include the following:

- i. How can HR Managers make use of contributions from research?
- ii. Has the commitment research and debate affected HR practice?
- iii. What specific areas need modifications in practice?
- iv. In what ways have practitioners helped the ongoing debate and can complement the research efforts?

There are a number of deductions that can be made from the literature, which may be beneficial to the practitioners, particularly, in effective HRM.

**Employee commitment, attitudes and incentives:** The results from Shepherd and Mathews's (2000) survey of practitioners indicate that employee attitude is the most common differentiator of committed and non-committed employees. This further reinforces the prominence and dominance of *attitudinal commitment/affective commitment*. Practitioners should, therefore, be interested in their employees' attitudes because they often give signal of potential problems that may arise; and they also significantly influence behaviour.

Research studies (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Benkhoff, 1997) have shown that several of the variables considered as antecedents of organisational commitment are actually interwoven. For example, Elangovan (2001) has recently shown, that satisfaction, stress, commitment and intention to quit could be interrelated concepts such that leaving out one of these variables in a multi-dimensional behavioural research might confound findings. The practical significance of the interwoven nature of this concept would depend on the extent to which an organisation needs to enhance the commitment of its employees through a well-packaged incentive system that would induce commitment. In the design of a total employee package, the following should not be ignored.

- i. Career progress or job advancement (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2000).
- ii. Satisfaction derived from the non-work environment and activities, including health and physical condition (Gbadamosi, 1995a, and 1995b)
- iii. General satisfaction derived or derivable from the job itself as well as the job environment that makes employees develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the job or the organisation thereby making the desire or intention to quit unattractive.

Managers in Africa generally hold that workers attitudes are poor. Personnel practitioners in Africa, Kamoche and Muuka (2001) claims are still preoccupied with "bread and butter issues" rather than the more long-term responsibility of developing individual and team skills towards an organisational stock of knowledge. While such statements may be too sweeping in generalisation giving the impression of one Africa where every country is exactly the same, or nearly so, the reality on ground in countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt makes such argument simplistic. Indeed there are evidences in some multinational corporations in these countries to show that the human resource practice compares favourably with what obtains in the foreign offices of such organisations. This does not, however, remove the problems of HR practice in the African continent.

**Employee commitment as voluntary and dynamic:** Commitment denotes an action that is not only "*personal*" to the committed worker but also completely voluntary and rational. Management cannot force it; neither can they hire consultants to initiate it. The employee can also withdraw it if it is considered as no longer serving a mutual purpose – for both the employee and management. Since the committed employee often expects something in return, the practitioners should find means of reciprocating committed employees.

This foregoing argument may reincarnate "the nature of man" argument and the theory X and Y debate; conversely it may reawaken the appropriate leadership style argument. The efforts at espousing leadership that is indigenous to Africa are weakened by several published accounts by Africans and non-Africans alike where the West has been used as benchmark and Africa has been urged to catch up (Arthur *et al.* 1995; Kamoche, 1992; Kiggundu, 1988 among others). Blunt and Jones (1997) have perhaps summarised this best when they noted that such, probably inadvertent, views misconstrue the nature and possible effects of African leadership styles, and conclude, wrongly, that greater congruence with Western models is **always** (emphasis this author's) what is required. Blunt and Jones (1997) have also shown that current western notions of leadership are not widely applicable in Africa and East Asia. The major reasons have to do with significant differences in values concerning authority, group loyalties and interpersonal harmony. Like many other

managerial theories and practices, very little effort has been made to scientifically test these “indigenous” positions and especially synthesise them into a body of knowledge which will benefit indigenous African leadership theory and practice.

**Employee commitment and work relationships:** Managers concerned about both turnover and work performance have to be aware of the need to apply a different set of policies in each case (Benkhoff, 1997). If managers are concerned about keeping their valued employees, they should ensure that workers have competent and trustworthy superiors and feel treated fairly and with respect, and they should not put employees under too much work pressure (Benkhoff, 1997). While causal relationships have not been established, managers might give more consideration to their subordinates’ needs should they wish to increase the commitment of employees (Rowden, 2000).

**Employee commitment and communication:** Managers should communicate clearly, visibly and always. This would give constant information about the progress of the work as well as actual performance against stated targets (DeCotiis and Summers, 1987) and they should be concerned about the direction of communication flow (Gbadamosi, 1995b).

**Employee commitment and organisational culture:** Organisational culture also has a role in the development of commitment. This is, however, an area that has witnessed little empirical investigation, particularly in Africa. For example, what is the role of various characteristics of the organisational culture in the development of commitment? Many authors have identified that one of the defining characteristics of HRM is that of managing organisational culture to achieve employee commitment (Sisson, 1990; Guest, 1995).

Indeed, McGunnigle and Jameson (2000) noted that it is not possible to consider HRM and employee commitment without some reference to organisational culture. Lamsa and Savolainen (2000) have also indicated that commitment is a dynamic and multiple concept rather than an either/or phenomenon. It is contextual and shaped by dynamics specific to certain cultural and social contexts. They further noted that the commitment of managers is not as self-evident as the commitment literature assume. What, for example, are the peculiarities of the cultural settings, which the African manager must understand to be able to adjust his managerial practice in order to build and sustain the required levels of commitment?

**Employee commitment and organisational change:** Empirical findings (e.g. Iverson, 1996; Yousef, 2000) support the influence of organisational commitment on attitude towards organisational change. While a highly committed individual might more readily identify with and accept organisational change efforts that are perceived beneficial to the organisation, she/he might similarly be expected to strongly resist change judged harmful to the organisation. It is equally possible that employees with strong *continuance commitment* might be less willing to accept changes because of the fear that such changes might reduce the benefits they are currently gaining in their present organisations. Change efforts are at the ebb of modern managerial practice – it is a constant. African managers need to understand the nature of change and be cautious in their change efforts.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussions, we can make a number of recommendations and reach some tentative conclusions:

1. The African manager should be more interested not only in the career advancement and job environment of employees but also be more humane by caring about non-work activities that might affect employee performance.



2. If commitment is voluntary and dynamic, the African manager should be dynamic and persuasive.
3. Work relationships are important to employees' worldwide. The African worker is not an exception.
4. Clarity and flow of managerial communication is essential for enhancing commitment.
5. If change is constant, managerial practice is dynamic. The African manager must implement change efforts with a lot of caution.
6. Culture has overbearing influence in understanding commitment; the African manager must understand the realities of culture in managerial practice. Socio-cultural factors will always be an essential component to consider for successful management practice.

Human resources managers could use the findings from the research literature on commitment to generally improve the work performance and reduce turnover of employees in organisations. This is because an effective organisation requires both effective management and employees. Academics could also improve research contributions to practice by focusing more on practitioners' view in the design of future studies. Such linkages are paramount to increasing the organisational commitment of employees at all times. For management, a satisfied and committed work force translates into higher productivity due to fewer disruptions caused by absenteeism or the loss of good employees. Africans need to develop their own management philosophy and continually improve on it in order to advance the efficiency of their organisation and of the employees.

Since organisational commitment refers to relatively more stable attitudes held by individuals towards their organisation, the more favourable they are, the greater the individual's acceptance of the goals of the organisation, as well as their willingness to exert more efforts on behalf of the organisation. Its importance in the management of people need not be overemphasised. For the mere fact that employees' level of commitment to their organisation often exert influences on various other facets of their behaviour, it remains important for managers to enhance such commitment by paying attention to the factors in the preceding discussions. The challenges for both academics and practicing managers in Africa in enhancing commitment and performance are palpable.

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