

Productivity Improvement Crusade - A Tale of 2 Continents

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Abstract

The idea of productivity dates back to before the 1800s which was principally restricted to agriculture, the production, and consumption of food. Then, another school of thought emerged who saw productivity beyond agriculture to manufacturing and industrial need. (1) The productivity improvement journey moved from experts from different parts of the world and different schools of thought such as Frank Gilbreth, Lilian Gilbreth, George Elton Mayo, Charles E. Sorensen, Frederick Winslow Taylor, and so on but the good news is that the journey never stopped rather the concept of productivity improvement has been moving from generation to generation and nation to nations.

On this same premise, productivity improvement was the establishment of the World Confederation of Productivity Science which started the productivity improvement journey through 2 major platforms - the World Network of Productivity Organizations (WNPO) and the World Academy of Productivity Science (WAPS) to harmonies and promote productivity improvements in national and regional productivity across the globe. (2) The objective of the WPC is great but in reality, how effective is this crusade across the nations of the earth? This journal aims to have a personal-experience insight into the productivity improvement crusade in 2 continents; a critical look at the practice in Africa and America.

My experience as a productivity professional from Africa who practice in Africa and now live and work in America, I have a lot of experience and knowledge to share about productivity improvement campaigns in both continents. This material will help practitioners in the 2 continents or anyone in the productivity space who wants to embark on the productivity improvement journey as work, project, or business. This will be a good material for government and parastatals in the productivity sector to take note of and get insights.

Productivity-A need for all continents

Generally speaking, productivity is the need of every nation, organization, and people. So, whether you are a crusader in Africa or America, improving productivity is a big need. The goal of improving productivity is a song every government sing at every budget year. In Africa, it is said that Labor productivity differences between Sub-Saharan Africa and more advanced economies have remained large. (3) The inefficiencies in the use of technologies in the continent have become more important than undercapitalization in bridging this productivity gap. According to Economy policy; "The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979" (4) So, productivity improvement is a need of the 2 continents.

Also, during the pandemic, there was a big lesson for the world, no matter the color, race, or tribe, every human being wants to stay alive first before thinking about productivity. The approach by the government may differ but the truth is people work more remotely while the government sent relief packages to homes. In June 2021, an estimated 50% of the South African workforce was working from home full-time (5) while in the United States, 71% work from home (6) This is proof that the pandemic leveled the world in terms of productivity but nations began to find their solutions to survival and productivity. In all the continents of the world, different approaches and solutions were engaged to be able to keep the nation out of hunger.

On the other hand, I categorize the difference between these 2 continents in achieving and enhancing productivity improvement as follows; Structure, Infrastructure, and Culture. With an unbiased perspective, these differences are exposure of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the continents. Readers can find a way to learn, adjust or position for prospecting in the 2 continents as far as productivity improvement crusade is concerned.

Structure

Looking at funding as one of the structures of productivity improvement; the government of America spends so much on developing research and Development that will provoke productivity. According to U.S. Research and Development Funding and Performance: Fact Sheet; "federal funding for R&D grew from \$3.5 billion in 1955 to \$138.9 billion in 2019, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.9%" (7). Africa is also not left out with this effort from the government to improve the productivity of their states. However, Africa's share of global expenditure on research and development remained constant at 1.01% between 2014 and 2018 but, in Sub-Saharan Africa, it dropped from 0.44% to 0.42%. (8) This is very poor and affects the productivity improvement crusade in the continent.

One of the major factors waging war against the campaign of productivity in Africa is funding. Funding and financial support for the industries, small businesses, and even farmers to produce quality farm produce for the nation. In Africa, funding is a big problem, although the government tries in principle most of the time, they are unable to meet up with the huge demand. Africa has so much capacity but lacks funding for major projects and work to increase its productivity. In America, there are pockets of funding for farmers, there are special loans for manufacturing companies and key factors to their national productivity. Another interesting thing is that there is funding for research which is a big drive for productivity improvement. Data has it that Americans spent \$138.9 billion in 2019 on research (9). This research cut across, crops, produce pharmaceuticals, and many more. So, working on productivity improvement in this continent already provides you with huge support to succeed.

Labour is another structure of productivity improvement of a nation. Employment is one of the drivers of productivity improvement of a nation. In Africa. Africa continent has the lowest unemployment rate globally, from ages 15 to 24, which is 10.6 percent in 2021; the majority of Africa's youth work casually, and the majority are underemployed or continue to live in poverty despite being occupied with one informal job or the other due to low wages and the lack of social security which makes it difficult to compare African with America. (2021, ILO) (10) The opposite is the case in the United States, according to the bureau of statistics The national unemployment rate, 3.9 percent, declined by 0.3 percentage points over the month and was 2.8 points lower than in December 2020. (11) This made productivity improvement as a way of life rather than lip service by the government.

Professionalism is a major structure that makes a difference in national productivity. The numbers of productivity experts or professionals are less in many African nations compared to America. There are thousands of Productivity coaches, productivity consultants, productivity professionals in America. So, getting human resources to do the job is very readily available compared to Africa where we have a handful of them. The majority of the productivity experts in Africa are government workers working in the public sector. So, they may not be able to effect change in the system they work for as they are constrained by their ministry or the minister's policy per time. In America, there are loads of productivity experts who are private and non-governmental organizations, so they have a voice and can do their work as independent minds without the influence of any government or control. Productivity improvement becomes real and efficient because of the number of productivity professionals in the country.

Another powerful structure that births heavy productivity for nations is inter-trade. The trade barrier in Africa has not been resolved for many years. The Organisation of the African Union (OAU) has been on this course for many years, but they have yet to find a lasting solution. The implication of this is that, there are higher trade taxes in the continent compared to other continents and this is among the factors discouraging trade in African countries (12) Apart from high tariff trade barrier, we have other things impeding the development of trade in African which includes port congestion, technical standards, customs valuation above invoice prices, theft of goods, import permits, antidumping measures, violations of intellectual property rights (IPR), an inefficient bureaucracy, and excessive regulation, and requirements to localize supply. How can you successfully run a productivity improvement campaign? America may not be a perfect haven but the continent has made trade easy for members states while the states have their internal economy system.

Infrastructures

Another important factor to enhance productivity improvement crusade is amenities and infrastructure for productivity such as electric power generation and distribution, availability of cheap internet connections, good roads connection, water, and housing. These are real issues Africa is still battling with for many centuries. So, a productivity crusader may find it hard to navigate hurdles in Africa while to large extent has been taken care of or worked on to the barest minimum. According to Wikipedia "Energy in the United States comes mostly from fossil fuels: in 2020, data showed that 35% of the nation's energy originates from petroleum, 10% from coal, and 34% from natural gas. Nuclear power supplied 9% and renewable energy supplied 12%, mainly from hydroelectric dams and biomass; however, this also includes other renewable sources like wind, geothermal, and solar" (13)

One of the infrastructures of productivity improvement is data; I call it "intangible Infrastructure". It helps to record trends, analyze and predict the future. Without data, productivity science would be difficult to prove some of the assertions made by experts. In America, there is available data and resources to make fresh data available compared to Africa where some data are difficult to find, and where you find such data, it will be external data from other parts of the world. I know there is a lot of work done by scholars in Africa to change this but the reality is that African data by African is hard work. The implication of this is that data from outside Africa can be doctored to suit the perspectives of the researcher and may not be the actual reality captured. So how can you fully pull productivity campaigns through while there is inaccurate or insufficient data? This is the big predicament in the productivity improvement campaign. This also affects policymaking for the continent (14)

Another "intangible infrastructure" that productivity thrives on is security, the case of insecurity and terrorism is a thorn in the flesh for African productivity development. For example, in west Africa, farmers' production has dropped because of the emergence of the "Boko Haram" terrorist group. Many farmers are killed or kidnapped daily and farm produce destroyed because of terrorist activities. The implication of this is that food prices have gone up and the connection between rural places for commercial activities was very difficult and dangerous. (15) How well can you take a productivity improvement campaign to the nooks and crannies of Africa in the face of terrorism. This is not to say there are no new terrorism attacks in the continent of America but you can see control and a high level of peace from rural to urban parts of the states. So, for a productivity improvement campaign to be effective, the security of the experts is very important and that is a big factor.

Apart from security, another infrastructure is good roads and connectivity: African roads and connections may be difficult to deliver maximum productivity because of bad roads. The majority of the produce from farms will not be able to get to the marketplace because of the bad road network. Farmers labor so much to produce food for the continents but transportation and movement of the goods from rural to urban areas is very difficult. Road network and connectivity are very important if we must achieve a productivity improvement drive in Arica. In America, road connectivity is key and the government spends so much on rural roads and connections. The farm produces get to any part of the world right from the farm with some using helicopters or drones to achieve better delivery. Although America's rural areas have their challenge but far better than the rural network in Africa. Data have it that, over 69% of America's Road miles are located in rural areas, totaling over 6 million miles (16) This makes productivity improvement campaigns to be more achievable in this part of the world compared to Africa.

Don't let us forget that productivity improvement has a lot to do with product quality evaluation and marketability. In Africa, it is not that the majority of the products are of less quality but have poor packaging. The packaging from the farm or production center is poor, affecting the quality of the farm produce when it gets to the market. Many of these farm produce will get to the market with poor quality. The point is that the poor packaging is not their doing but they do not have good facility to keep and right packaging for the sustainability of the farm produce and package for the market. This can make productivity improvement journey far as the available farm produce are not well packaged and

marketable. In America, the opposite is the case, farm produce can be well kept safe in a technological silo before coming to the market and good packaging companies are available to partner with the farms to get out the best produce, this gives the productivity campaign a good ride.

Culture

A strong culture that sustains productivity is Education. Education has a great impact on the smooth crusade of Productivity Improvement. Education in this respect covers formal and informal education. African still struggles with educational level, although efforts from government show there is an improvement culture and poverty still hold many downs to the old way of doing things and makes new productivity paradigm a hard job for the crusader. According to Wikipedia, in 2018, 'nearly 9/10 (90 percent) of all adults 25 years or older reported they had completed at least high school or obtained a GED/high school equivalency certificate' (17) Education data stated also that educational attainment among 25- to 29-year-olds in the United States has risen at every level by as much as 80% since the year 2000 (18) This is good backroad for productivity improvement to ride.

You cannot talk about productivity without thinking about the culture of the organization and the nation. America has a learning culture and is receptive to seeking new knowledge which is a big plus for the preparatory ground for productivity improvement. Although there are a lot of organizations that still need to improve on the culture even in America but in Africa, it is a lot of work to break into the organization to teach or install a new culture of productivity. Many organizational leaders and managers in the helms of affairs would rather want to stay with their old ways of doing things and "if it had worked before, it will work again" (thinking mode) This made many of them stay on the old path and find it difficult to be open to a new way of doing things in their organization. When culture is negative towards new improvements in goods, services, or operations, a productivity improvement campaign becomes a difficult task.

The culture of broken policies is an enemy of sustainable productivity improvement. African government has not been able to drive productivity policies home because of this challenge. It is more like lip service than action. There are many policies by the African government but most of the time, it's always on paper without deliberate action, and even when there is action, a change of government is a broken vision and birth of a new policy and direction. This makes it difficult for productivity improvement in Africa. In America, although government makes a policy, they follow through, there could be adjustments if a new party comes in but there are occasions, they say "For the America Dream" They stand as one and move the country forward. Although. In Africa, a change of government means a change in almost all key policies even if they are in the same party. This same challenge we have in organizations when there is a change in new leadership or board. How can you affect change when the new man in the helms of affairs has a different perspective on productivity improvement?

The culture of focusing on self-aggradation above national interest is a major enemy of Africa's productivity improvement. From history, the majority of African leaders are corrupt and this is as a result of selfish leaders here who bring personal interest above national interest. According to Guardian Newspaper of the 8th of December, 2020; about \$140bn yearly loss to corruption in Africa. (19) This corruption is said to have affected all spheres of the productivity ecosystem for the state as a result of selfish leaders. When poverty is in play, people lose priority, they focus on survival and living alone for what they can grab not what they can give. The focus of the people will primarily be on tangible and inconsequential things. This way of life, does not prioritize productivity and may not see the need to improve the machinery of production rather ask "What is in it for me?" I am not saying categorically that there is no corruption in the American system but we may say that the level of corruption is high in Africa because of selfish leaders who have been in helms of affairs over the years and this will not be good for productivity improvement sustainability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am not in any way writing to bring down Africa but to identify in this journal the challenges of Africa in achieving the full potential that the continent has. African leaders and experts should be ready for the responsibility to

bring the continent out of the dark. America too does have a lot of productivity gaps and they are working hard to bridge the gap. The record has it that U.S. Productivity falls most since 1981 and declining since that time. (20) Productivity is the bedrock of the economy, no matter what level any nation or continent is, there is always a need for improvement. This is the need for productivity experts to understand the continents they are or want to serve and take advantage of the gaps available for more efficient productivity improvement campaigns.

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