Muigai paced back and forth across the office floor one Wednesday evening. He began to notice significant discontent among his staff. What originally started with a few rumbling comments later manifested as decreasing performance.

Muigai’s firm employed thirty people and he desired the team to still feel like a family environment. He found meaning in his life that he provided a stable work environment for his employees. He tried hard not to let the company’s fluctuations affect his staff.

Meanwhile Wanja worked for Muigai. He performed data warehouse management functions at the firm. Now two years into his job, Wanja wondered whether he could progress. He appreciated that his pay check came regularly on time and that staff never feared layoffs. While Muigai hired Wanja based on his extensive skill set, Wanja yearned to expand his knowledge and options.

Muigai watched Wanja’s once stellar work start to deteriorate. Meanwhile Wanja spent substantial portions of each work day searching for new employment online. What caused Wanja’s discontent?

A reader of the above scenario may clearly notice the trouble at Muigai’s company: humans do not thrive as stagnant creatures. However, in the midst of a busy executive’s plethora of responsibilities, obvious causes of staff displeasure often escape notice.

As Business Talk ends its series on research techniques, let us demonstrate how research can change lives in the real business world. While mountains of data exists on how to manage employees, grow strategically, negotiate deals, etc., a shameful disconnect still exists between what science knows and what businesses actually do. Academics uncover thrilling methodology and techniques, but publish for other academics to read. Meanwhile, managers learn from other managers or unqualified academics. Cutting edge research rarely reaches training halls and classrooms.

So Muigai manages in an information void. He attends management seminars with famous CEOs as inspirational speakers. He leaves the sessions full of hope and his mind brimming with simple clichés. Both his optimism and the clichés fade quickly each time as the real world at his own office leaves him to realize his circumstance exist differently than the famous CEO’s personal journey shared at a seminar.
What Muigai actually requires involves concrete facts on what works, what doesn’t, and test results in real companies. Muigai felt fear of discussing career growth with his staff since he thought that if a manager mentioned it to an employee then that same employee might start to think something that they have never thought before: leaving their current job. However, humans are not robots. Humans exist as sentient beings and hold such thoughts long before a manager ever mentions it to them. So managers often ignore the unspoken elephant in office settings.

A staggering volume of research shows that employees do not prefer stagnant work environments. Lack of positive change and growth leads staff to lower their affective commitment which entails employees’ psychological attachment to their respective organizations because they should increasingly identify with the objectives and values of their entities.2

Remember from the Business Talk research series that all effects hold causes. If stagnancy in a job causes lower commitment and therefore lower performance, then the opposite as an independent variable should increase commitment as the dependent variable. Numerous researchers, including Qingxiong Weng, James McElroy, Paula Morrow, and Rongzhi Liu among many others show what antecedents, or independent variables, can increase firm performance through employee commitment.

Research shows that various aspects of an employee’s commitment to his or her organisation increase when he or she perceives that the entity provides high promotion opportunities with fairness, personal development opportunity, and opportunity for learning.

While managers widely suspect positive outcomes from the before mentioned three causes, the precise effects remain elusive in most managers’ minds. So managers implement different ways, or “how”, of rolling out promotions, development, and learning. Research shows that the proper way of “how”: recognize and reward the above growth.

Studies by researchers show that managers must adhere to the following four human resources principles. First, employees constantly weigh their career progress against their own goals. Managers need to tap into that self assessment. Instead of ignoring it, meet it head on. Actual techniques might include employees completing personal career plans and meet at least quarterly for career progression coaching with their managers.

Second, employees psychologically crave professional ability development. Attending a simple training and receiving another useless certificate of participation to hang on a wall is not enough. Employees want to expand their skill sets. Managers can provide meaningful training, mentoring, coaching, job rotation, and conduct skills inventories.
Third, employees care about the speed of promotions. Wanja, as an example, saw no opportunities for swift advancement. Fourth, employees covet remuneration growth. It is not about the money an employee presently earns. Staff in professional positions higher up on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs actually psychologically crave the above four realities more than high salaries in the short-term.

So, research provides solutions for Muigai’s staffing issues. But where might a Kenyan researcher tap into the research? First, researchers tested the above cause and effect solutions in North America, Europe, Australia, East Asia, and Central Asia. However, Sub-Saharan Africa still requires validation and Kenyan researchers may test and modify the theory here. Second, after testing the independent and dependent variables, see whether the regressions show greater, lesser, or even opposite effects here in Kenya. These two methods applied to thousands of theories would greatly add to global knowledge and build Kenya’s research.

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