Why African workers think differently from rest of world

Interaction among employees helps to build trust. PHOTO | FILE

By SCOTT BELLOWS

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In Summary

- Workers on continent less likely to disclose information to bosses as show of trust.

In Africa, the glorious continent, we share a vibrant history punctuated with proud matchless traditions. The Pan-African renaissance champions creativity, innovation, and forward looking, along with a reconnection to our precolonial roots.

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From the distinct music traditions of South Africa, moving north to the hunter gatherer lineage of Zambia, Botswana, and Malawi, to the social experiments of Tanzania, the standout cuisine of Ethiopia, ancient Nubian cultures of South Sudan, heading west to the cinematic excellence of Nigeria and the painful history of human trafficking from Senegal to Ghana to Cameroon, sub-Saharan Africa displays many positive attributes to the world accompanied by globally recognised historical tragedies like the European, North American, and Arab slave trades.

Here in Kenya, the powerhouse of East Africa, our booming real estate market, bustling professional services industry, Silicon Savannah, growing entrepreneurship, impeccable tourism infrastructure, and outstanding education sector bring us global plaudits, accolades, praise, and acclamation. Part of celebrating Africa involves frank, open, and honest conversations about what makes us uniquely stand out from the rest of the world, both good and bad.

Differences include not only how sub-Saharan Africans, like in all regions of the world, evolved different physical traits, but also how our cultures developed inimitable distinctions. The way an East Asian views a situation, such as an overbearing boss as an example, exists differently than how a northern European or sub-Saharan African or a South American would look at the same condition.

Many professionals in multinational offices notice various anecdotes that suggest differences in thinking, but fail to dig deeper and delve down to the root causes. In as much, one remarkable difference that embodies how sub-Saharan Africans think distinctively as compared to other regions of the world entails how we trust each other in our personal lives as well as in our offices.

Last week's Business Talk addressed the speed at which employees trust within organisations. It discussed, among other things, how humans psychologically pass through three distinct stages in order to trust another person or entity: belief, decision, and taking an action based on the established trust.
Sub-Saharan Africans take longer to believe in others and decide to trust colleagues slower than other areas of the world. While Scandinavian and American citizens demonstrate high levels of interpersonal trust, Brazil retains the world’s least trusting people. Africans fall in between the two extremes.

However, our brains here in the continent process information relatively inversely than other regions in terms of not just speed of trust, but what makes us trust another person. So, if you are now reading your Business Daily newspaper in your office, then look to your left and then turn and look to your right.

Do you trust the two colleagues seated closest to you? Unknowingly, your brain goes through an inventory check to determine whether you believe in them, will decide to trust them, and whether you will actually act on your decision. How might you know if you actually trust someone?

Australian researcher Nicole Gillespie famously developed a model to know the degree to which employees trust. The two constructs include one’s willingness to rely on a boss or a colleague and the other involves whether one will actually disclose personal confidential information to a boss or colleague.

Interestingly, everywhere in the world where the model has been tested to date, employees who rely on their direct supervisor or top manager are more likely to perform better at work, be more committed to their jobs, and intend to quit the organisation less than those who do not rely on their direct supervisors or top managers.

Similarly, employees who show a greater willingness to disclose information to supervisors and top managers also show the same positive effects of greater commitment, higher performance, and lower turnover than those workers who do not disclose. From Europe to East Asia to the Middle East to North America, researchers uniformly find these linkages.

However, the first such study done in sub-Saharan Africa outside of South Africa was conducted by USIU-A.

Stunningly, here in Africa, workers showed nearly the exact opposite thought patterns than in other parts of the world. An African worker is dramatically less likely to disclose information to his or her supervisor or top managers as a demonstration of trust.

Usually around the globe, disclosing information to colleagues enhances the interpersonal bonds in a workplace and deepens the feelings of mutual reciprocity of staff and managers. However, when an African worker discloses personal information, instead of feeling affectively bonded, we instead feel overly vulnerable.

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The more an African worker shares with his or her supervisor or top management, the more likely they are to seek other employment and quit their jobs.

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No other region in the world thinks this way. In terms of reliance, we find no relationship between a worker’s willingness to rely on a supervisor or top manager and their desire to stay with the organisation. These findings provide earth shaking results for organisational behaviourists and executives. So, keep team buildings, workplace conversations, and outings professional and do not delve into crossing personal boundaries.

Read next week in the Business Daily whereby we discuss the mental checklist that us sub-Saharan Africans utilise to decide whether we rely or disclose at all and how it is opposite of westerners, Middle Easterners, and East Asians.

In order to highlight this shocking new research, as a non-profit institution, USIU-A plans a CSR community outreach to the Business Daily readers who are business executives and aspiring business leaders on August 17 at 6:00pm at USIU Africa, behind Safari Park Hotel.

The session will include an organisational trust simulation, materials, and discussions on how to build trust in an African context and how Western methods of trust formation cause your employees to perform worse. Due to strong demand, we have increased the spaces. The next group of first 25 respondents to RSVP who mention Business Daily in their email receive free admission.

Discuss organisational trust with other Business Daily readers through #SpeedOfTrustKe on Twitter. Scott may be reached on scott@ScottProfessor.com. Also follow the author on Twitter: @ScottProfessor.