How sub-Saharan Africa staff take capable bosses

Trust, the cornerstone of civilised society, enables all business and family transactions to take place. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

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In Summary

- A world without trust presents society with an unbearable life.
- The above two unique aspects cause African workers to disclose less personal information to bosses than anywhere else in the world and also lead to workers not relying on their own supervisors even when their managers hold phenomenal skill sets.

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A life without trust means not believing your employer will ever pay you regardless of the payment track record, constantly spying on your employees because you highly suspect them of stealing or not producing work, going through your spouse's phone every day as you suspect him or her of every imaginable infidelity, refusing to pay a shop owner until you test a product at home for a full month just to make sure it contains no faults, or a democracy whereby citizens riot over every little issue because a politician's word means nothing to them. A world without trust presents society with an unbearable life.

As discussed during the past two weeks in Business Talk, trust represents the willingness to be vulnerable and take a risk on another person or organisation. In Russia, a low trust country, post-signature documents must be sewn together, covered in wax with a seal, and signatures across envelope closures.

Even the presence of nominal trust in low amounts yields more onerous techniques to mitigate negative expectations of others than in high trust cultures like Scandinavia.

As highlight in the USIU-A and Business Daily public lecture held yesterday on organisational trust, when employees feel that they trust a co-worker, boss, or top manager, they both rely on the other party and disclose to the other party.

Last week, this column delineated how sub-Saharan Africans think differently than elsewhere in the world and prefer not to disclose at all. Let us delve deeper into the fascinating world of workplace psychology and our own unique version of African trust.

Not only do employees here in sub-Saharan Africa try to leave an employer if they disclose too much, workers also hold different reasons for trusting supervisors and top managers than staff in other continents.
Mountains of empirical research conducted in the Americas, Europe, East Asia, Central Asia, Australia, and the Middle East all show that workers go through a mental checklist in order to trust. Dozens of researchers test and refine Roger Mayer, James Davis, and David Schoorman’s famous organisational trust framework.

First, if employees usually believe in their boss’ ability to perform his or her job then they hold higher levels of trust in the same boss.

The reasoning behind the psychology stands that if the boss has ability, then the whole department and individual employees retain a higher chance of job continuity as they succeed together.

**Double standards**

However, sub-Saharan African workers prefer to not work for a highly capable manager.

In the continent, employees fear that a solidly skilled boss would hold higher performance standards for their staff.

Inasmuch, workers worry that they might not survive in a more challenging environment or they do not desire to work hard for a boss they perceive to hold higher requirements for them. Also, due to the large power distance in Africa whereby citizens psychologically distance themselves from leaders, the effect translates into our workplaces whereby the higher skilled our boss, then the less we desire to disclose to or rely on them.

We see the power distance effect when a thief robs a shop owner in a small village, the community desires to lynch the individual, but if a politician from the same area maybe loots massive quantities of CDF funding and everyone in the community knows or suspects the theft, when the politician visits, he or she is treated to a hero’s welcome regardless. The double standards boil down to Africa’s large cultural power distance as famously highlighted by Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede.

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Sub-Saharan Africans throughout the continent, except South Africa, are the only world citizens to hold these contrarian views on supervisor abilities.

Second, employees globally desire superiors who hold goodwill, good intentions, or benevolence towards their subordinates.

If the staff perceive that their boss has their best interests in mind and they expect him or her to act to protect them and promote them, then those same staff are also more likely to trust that particular manager.

However, Africans also view benevolence differently than other cultures.

A boss that staff perceive to hold benevolence towards them will cause workers to disclose personal information to that manager. But the African worker will not professionally rely on their manager whether or not they perceive their boss to hold goodwill towards them and want the workers best interests to thrive.

Researchers believe that sub-Saharan Africans’ different perception of supervisor goodwill is explained by our collectivist tendencies. Researchers find that collectivist societies in East Asia are less likely to rely on colleagues and managers to support them since they already feel adequately supported from their families and home communities.

Since Africa generally holds higher levels of collectivism, then it stands to reason that no matter how good our bosses are to us personally, we would still not rely on them because the boss may come from a different community and we are trained from a very early age to only trust and rely on those from our own communities.

Third, the only determinant of organisational trust that applies around the world and statistically regresses the same in sub-Saharan Africa involves integrity.

The more workers perceive their supervisors to hold true integrity, then the more likely they are to deeply trust them by disclosing information to them and relying on them. Africans value integrity even more than other global communities.

Discuss and debate organisational trust with other Business Daily readers through #SpeedOfTrustKe on Twitter. Stay tuned for the next USIU-Business Daily Public Lecture on professional writing on Saturday, September 24, 2016 at 2:00pm.

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