



## DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT SKILLS REQUIRED IN THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC OFFICE IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Public office in Nigeria has been a cardinal place where efforts at managing diversity using the instruments of quota system, zoning and federal character principle occur. This conceptual paper proposes the skills required to manage diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century public office in Nigeria. Literature review approach was adopted and, beginning with introduction, it explored key concepts, origin and approaches to diversity management. The origin of diversity management in the Nigerian public office was also x-rayed and the review showed the need for acquisition of 21st Century skills in managing diversity. Consequently, the author proposed the skills required to manage diversity in the 21st century public office in Nigeria as basic workplace skills; 21st Century skills and administrative skills. The proposal revealed constraints to acquiring the 21st century public office skills and implications for the teaching and learning of Business Education in the 21st Century Nigeria. This gave rise to three recommendations including Business Education students and teachers should recognise and appreciate dominant social identities and class ties which identify individuals' background and use same to select qualified students and teachers. This would address diversity behavioural stereotypes formed as a result of individual perceptions of others and create diversity rich environment in the institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Diversity, Diversity Management, Skill, 21st Century, Public Office.*

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### **Introduction**

Nigeria is an incredibly diverse country. According to the world factbook (n.d), the nation has over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and five hundred languages. Such multiplicity of ethnicity/language groups presents a deep diversity among the citizens including its workforce. This diversity means difference; a state of being diverse. Glazer (2019) opined that its use in public and scholarly discourse since 1970s refers to those differences primarily in race and ethnicity that have been the basis of exclusion or segregation or differential treatment in public action and private social interaction. The University of Oregon in Okonkwo (2018) expanded the



concept to “encompass acceptance and respect; understanding of individual uniqueness/recognition of individual differences. Several authors including Moorhead and Griffin (2000) agree that the concept is evident along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, family background, socio-economic status, age, marital status, education, employment status, sexual orientation, work experience, geographical location, income, physical and mental abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs and other ideologies. The nine letter word forms an acronym that perfectly defined it as “different individuals valuing each other regardless of skin, intellect, talent or years”. (Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, 2006).

The need to recognize, accept and value individual differences in the Nigerian public office has become more pronounced in the 21st Century because its characteristics including advances in technology, growth in knowledge/information, interconnectivity and changing demographics of countries presents the need for relationships and collaboration. Needham and Mangan (2014) also asserts there has been an increased public expectation, hence the need to acquire skills for diversity management. The concept, Dessler (2008) asserts is an art of maximizing diversity potential benefits while minimizing the potential barriers which can undermine an organizations performance. Better-Reed and Moore and Thomas in HimaBindu (2015) agree that the term refers to the systematic and planned commitment on the part of organizations to recruit and retain employees with diverse background and abilities, an activity that is likely to be seen within the human resource management training and development domains of organizations. Thus, the concept is a process which entails an organization's commitment to each worker's potential irrespective of inherent differences and similarities so that organizational goals would be achieved, it is also viewed as all the steps an organization take to create a positive work environment by recruiting and retaining employees with diverse background and abilities, and enabling employees attain maximum potential and contribute to the organization's strategic goals and objectives.

Both Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) and Bassett-Jones (2005) agree that the origin of diversity management dates back to the Hudson Institute influential report by Johnson and Parker in 1987. Lorbiecki and Jack stated that the report ignited interest in the changing demographic trends which is one of the four ways the concept evolved. Bassett-Jones also described the origin to have evolved out of social policies designed to promote equality however, while the policy in United States of



America is driven by a commitment to affirmative action, the same perceived as positive discrimination is proscribed by law in the UK hence, the agenda in each national context has been different. Despite these differences, Bassett-Jones concluded that both the USA and UK is in the vanguard when it comes to recognizing that diversity constitutes a major management challenge. The works of Al Gore; National Partnership for Reinventing Government (U.S) (2000), Ongori and Agolla (2007) Dessler (2008) and HimaBindu (2015) however, shows that the challenge has been handled through varied approaches which among others centre on leadership and management commitment, employee involvement and cultural transformation of management systems.

In order to effectively apply these approaches in a 21st Century public office in Nigeria, employers and employees should be equipped with a broad set of knowledge, work habits and character traits (skill) which are believed to be critically important for success in the 21st Century. Tone et al in Obi's (2005) defined skill as the ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in performing an act; a habit of doing a particular thing competently. Skill involves the exhibition of knowledge, capacity and competences acquired through systematic and sustained effort/commitment to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities and job functions. There are several types of skill (Fadel, 2008; Portway and Lane, 2018) however, this paper proposes: basic workplace skills; 21st century skills and administrative skill for the management of diversity in the 21st century public office in Nigeria.

### **Diversity Management in the Nigerian Public Office**

The need to discharge specific functions of government for the general welfare/joint interest gave rise to diversity management in the Nigerian public office also called civil service/public service. Babawale (n.d) views the concept is a mechanism where every member of the federation has equal access to the state's resources and opportunities and that its practice was provided for through the Federal Character principle contained in the 1979 and 1999 constitution; promotion of national unity, ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from few states/ethnic/sectional groups in the government or any of its agencies. Such efforts bothered on issues of unity, equality and fairness, particularly in the allocation of resources, employment opportunities and admission into institutions of learning. Meagher; Ajayi and Owunni in Akobo (2016) stated that it focused on dominant



social identities and class ties namely: ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations which identified individuals nationally based on their background hence, cultural problems triggered off the introduction of equal opportunity and diversity management in Nigeria as government adopted the federal system of government with the instrument of federal character, quota and zoning systems. It is noteworthy that Nyamberga in Akobo (2016) asserts that diversity management and equal opportunity are used interchangeably. Moreover, the survey of diversity management in the Nigerian public office, the United States of America and the United Kingdom shows that the concept and its management are 21st Century phenomena while the workplace is its demonstration point for the Nigerian public office. Consequently, this paper proposes diversity management skills required in the 21st Century public office in Nigeria.

### **Skills Required to Manage Diversity in the 21st Century Public Office in Nigeria Basic Workplace Skills**

These are higher order thinking skills that enable employees remember, understand, apply, create, evaluate and analyze knowledge/information. It includes competencies/soft skills useful in achieving professional aspirations and organizational goals like: reading, writing, computation, listening, oral verbalization of thoughts, conceptualization of facts, creative thinking, organization and problem solving, self esteem, goal setting/motivation, personal/career development, negotiation/conflict resolution, teamwork, organizational effectiveness and leadership/shared leadership. This skill can be used to manage diversity in the 21st Century public office in Nigeria when employers/managers encourage participative management; provide basic training using the applied approach which links learning outcomes directly to job performance; monitor progress and ensure that those that wield influence possess more knowledge/ability.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

These are: Life and Career skills including flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability and leadership and responsibility; Learning and Innovation skills comprising critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation and communication and collaboration; and Information, Media and Technology skills consisting information literacy, media literacy and Information, Communication and Technology Literacy.



(Fadel,2008). 21<sup>st</sup> Century presents a new understanding of coverage in critical thinking and problem solving; life and career skills and new areas of emphasis for creativity & innovation skills and Information, Media and technology skills hence, these skills could be used in varied learning environments and professional development.

Pedagiayandragogia (2016) asserts that Learning and Innovation skills enhances thinking outside the proverbial box thus, breaking new grounds, developing new ideas, preparation for the future while Larias in Fadel (2008) stated that it enables a demonstration of originality and inventiveness at work, openness, responsive to new and diverse perspectives, exercise of sound reasoning, flexibility in making vital compromise for common good and interconnection among systems. The skill can be used to manage diversity in the 21st Century public office when employers: provide equipment, material resources, structural facilities; compensation/rewards and other motivation that can entice workers to brainstorm and contribute to efficient service delivery, both employers and employees give room for positive interdependence where feedback is given and received, equal participation so that credits are shared for good ideas and tasks accomplished; each other's views are respected; become flexible and compromise for mutual goals to be attained; are willing to take responsibility and provide for group processing.

Information, Media and Technology Skills: this is vital for accessing, evaluating, using and managing information; analyzing and creating media products and effective application of technology. Kivunja (2015)statedthat these skills can be applied in three broad ways namely, using: technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate and communicate information; digital technologies appropriately to access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information and applying a fundamental understanding of the ethical/legal issues surrounding the access and use of information technologies. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009) also asserts its use in accessing and evaluating different types of information including the ability to access efficient information when needed and effective information relevant to the task on hand. Thus, this skill can be used to manage diversity when workers are empowered to access, organize, integrate research, evaluate, create and communicate information needed in the workplace.

Life and Career Skills: These include basic abilities for daily life like professionalism, networking, time management and leadership. The Partnership for



21st Century Skills asserts that among many others, it enables an employee adapt to varied roles, job responsibilities, schedules and context, work effectively in an ambiguous climate like a multicultural environment and changing priorities, incorporate feedback, negotiate and balance diverse views.

The skill can be used to manage diversity in the 21st Century public office in Nigeria when employers set goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, result oriented and time bound for the employees; prioritize tasks according to requirement; give employees some level of independence to respond to change as the need arises with minimal supervision and be enabled to explore and expand the way operations are carried out; define clearly the lines of authority, methods of processes and operations, agree on tasks and job specification; establish organizational culture through proper mission and vision statement; delegate authority ; provide exemplary leadership; understand the intercultural nature of the workplace for active participation of all; operate open communication channel; motivate employees and provide training.

### **Administrative Skills**

These are all the skills/ competencies related to keeping an office organized and help employees to deliver quality service to the organization. It includes multi-tasking, time management, control and management of staff, attention to detail; technological skills that enhance the transfer of thoughts, ideas and information and the maintenance/ keeping of office records. These skills are evident in an employees' educational qualification, competencies, abilities, talents and general experiences. (Obeki, 2012)

Administrative skills can be used to manage diversity in the Nigerian 21st Century public office by communicating the organisation's policies, procedures and other important information to staff; identifying the best way to plan and organize work based on the public office's culture; treating employees as individuals and encouraging others to do so; creating opportunities for innovation and training of staff and engaging in decision on criteria.

### **Constraints to the Acquisition of Diversity Management Skills**

The analysis so far reveals that lack of: unified collective vision for learning; development of core subject knowledge and understanding among students who eventually form the workforce on graduation; necessary support systems;



interconnectivity hinder the acquisition of diversity management skills. Hence, these arise because of lack/poor: opportunity/motivation which discourages workers commitment for positive interdependence/collaboration; knowledge on the use of information technology and communication tools by some employers and employees and resistance to innovation/change by the same. Moreover, lack of conducive work environment including equipment, material resources and structural facilities in the 21st Century Nigerian public office; lack of respect for the cultural differences among the diverse workforce and the practice of unethical behaviour particularly, among those wielding influence, power and authority; inadequate communication of the 21st Century public office goals, policy, procedure and other vital information among employer and employee and time constraints pose challenges also.

### **Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Business Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria**

Business Education students and teachers should recognise and appreciate the dominant social identities and class ties that identify individuals nationally based on their background and apply same in the selection of qualified students and teachers.

Clear vision/goal for the teaching and learning of Business Education, instruments/curriculum and procedure/methodology of achieving the set goal should be established.

Collaboration between institutions where Business Education is taught and industry/agencies for training and retraining and provision of interconnectivity tools, structural facilities and material resources is highly imperative.

### **Conclusion**

The author argues that if Diversity Management in the 21st Century Public Office in Nigeria would be effective, skills like basic workplace skills, 21st century skills and administrative skills are required. Acquisition of these skills has implication for the teaching and learning of Business Education in the 21st century Nigeria. Consequently, three recommendations believed would positively contribute to Business Education were proffered.



## Recommendations

Business Education students and teachers should recognise and appreciate dominant social identities and class ties which identify individuals' background and use same to select qualified students and teachers. This would address diversity behavioural stereotypes formed as a result of individual perceptions of others and create diversity rich environment in the institutions.

Government through Business Education specialists and policy makers should ensure regular review of curriculum and enforce its delivery, taking cognizance of the 21st Century needs so that graduates would be equipped with diversity management skills.

Government, corporate organization/philanthropists should increase funding of institutions where Business Education is taught so that, regular training, conferences/workshops would be organised and tools necessary for interconnectivity, structural facilities and material resources made accessible for learning/work to students/teachers.

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