

Are Ugandan employees

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

After being served several warning letters by the disciplinary committee of a prominent marketing firm in Kampala, 37-year old Malaika Nanteza (not real name) was sacked. Her family knew her to be brilliant and she had worked with the firm for two years.

Although Malaika often met her monthly targets, she was a perpetual latecomer and disrespectful towards clients. In addition, she would also absent herself from work. Her example comes in handy as we commemorate Labour Day, under the theme “Building the nation through good work ethics.”

According to Eseza Byakika of Coach Africa, compared to Kenyan employees, Ugandan workers are lazy. “They take things for granted, not until they are in hot soup or summoned, that is when they wake up,” Byakika says.

She adds that Ugandan workers need a lot of supervision, as compared to Kenyans who are self-driven and always strive to achieve their targets. She says Ugandan employees do not strive to excel at work. “For example, they are a bit laidback and do not work on personal growth so that they can deliver better,” she explains. Nevertheless, she says Ugandans are better than Tanzanian employees. The negative attitudes to work by Tanzanian employees, she says, have a lot to do with language challenges and the nature of their education system. She says their poor competence in the English language is a big barrier for growth and that is why the majority of Tanzania workers struggle

UGANDAN WORKERS NEED A LOT OF SUPERVISION, COMPARED TO KENYANS WHO ARE SELF-DRIVEN AND ALWAYS STRIVE TO ACHIEVE THEIR TARGETS.

at the workplace.

Meanwhile, Byakika says Kenyans, especially those in the service industry, beat Ugandans hands down. “For example, in the hotel industry, managers from Kenya perform better than Ugandan managers,” she says.

She blames the gap on the curriculum at the university that does not prepare students for the employment world by including tips about personal development and good work ethics. Echoing her, Sam Lyomoki, a Workers’ MP, says Ugandans have a negative attitude towards work, a vice he thinks stems from poor upbringing. He says way back in primary school, when one committed an offence the punishment would be work-related.

“The pupils would be told to slash the compound, dig in the school gardens or fetch



Labour ministry officials cleaning Nakasero Market last week. Photo by Mary Kansiime

water, which created a negative attitude towards work,” he says.

He says Uganda should take lessons from other countries and work towards changing people’s attitude. For instance, in Singapore, he says the only resource they had was labour (people) and all they did was to work on employees’ attitude. He says before they changed their attitude, engineers did not want to repair cars. It is that same attitude that Ugandan top management employees have and

all they think of is delegating. Lyomoki says great countries are great not by virtue of health, but by the wealth of their virtue and this is where work ethics fall.

However, Martin Turyasiima, the assistant commissioner in charge of services at the Ministry of Labour, Gender and Social Development differs from Lyomoki and Byakika. He says Ugandans are not lazy because those working abroad for example in the US are praised.

lazy compared to Kenyans?

Turyasiima links the poor work ethics to the bad conditions such as poor pay. "If you are paying workers peanuts their productivity will be low. Labour is a living thing that has emotions and if the workers are paid little, emotionally, they will not contribute to their maximum," he explains.

Aside, he says the poor attitude towards work is promoted by uncertainty, for example, some people work for six months without a clue as to how much they will earn. At least 70% of workers in Uganda do not have appointment letters, clearly stating their terms and conditions of work. They work expecting the employer to give them something at the end of the month. "So, how do you expect such a person to have good work ethics?" Turyasiima asks.

In addition, Turyasiima says because our economy revolves around agriculture and Uganda is a food basket, somehow our employees have a fallback position. They will not struggle so much to put food on the table, like our neighbours, the Kenyans. Even after Ugandan workers lose their jobs, they will either go to their relatives for food or if the worst comes, they will back to the village, where they can access food, until recently when things are becoming bad.

Comparative studies

Martin Wandera, the director of labour, employment and occupation safety and health at the Ministry of Labour, Gender and Social Development, says Uganda has got hard working people and there are no facts to support the perception that they are lazy.

Wandera disputes stories which have been doing the rounds that six Ugandans do the



A labourer at a cassava grinding mill without protective gear. Photo by Tony Rujuta

work done by one Kenyan as falsehoods because the facts in the World Bank productivity indicators show that Uganda has the highest labour productivity, which is measured by GDP per person employed.

According to a World Bank report, in 2014 Uganda's labour productivity was \$3,477 up from \$2,631 in 2003. Whereas that of Kenya in 2014 was \$3,397 and in 2003, Kenya had \$2,701. Tanzania, meanwhile, had \$2,380 in 2014 and \$1,716 in 2003.

He says this implies that Uganda's GDP, compared to other developed and middle earning countries, is low, but it has been

growing. It is lower than that of middle income countries. China's labour productivity in 2014, he says, was \$17,211, India's was \$9,907, UK's was \$49,447, USA had \$70,149, Singapore had \$52,024, in Malaysia, it was \$25,905, Vietnam had \$6,594 and in Japan it was \$44,304.

Do Ugandans value their jobs?

Norah Njuba Bwaya, the founder of the Institute of Worker Culture and Ethics, says Ugandans are perceived as non-performers or lazy because 86% of workers are doing the wrong jobs, which wastes resources.

"It is very difficult to get committed if there i

jobs, but what is killing them is the habit of complaining about the organisations they work for, which she finds rather weird and yet they are part of the problem.

She adds that some of employees in the public service score poorly because the public service has totally degenerated simply because government does not emphasise efficient work to employees.

This, she says, has made workers think they are permanent and pensionable. Such negative attitudes, she says, are pronounced in the health sector where workers mistreat patients and yet still keep their jobs, until they retire. Such attitudes, she says, are not acceptable in developed countries.

What influences work ethics?

According to Wandera, work ethics are influenced by socialisation and that character is shaped by environment or people around us. Socialisation is a process of learning or passing on knowledge; values from one generation to another.

Wandera says since there are no schools teaching values like honesty, embracing good work ethics starts from home.

"We must promote a culture of work, people should know that a living is earned. Right from childhood we must emphasise values like honesty, which are indicators of good work ethics and, here, families and schools have a big role," he explains, adding that not all people who have dependents are responsible or have good work values, reason being the value of love and care starts from family.

Continued on page 30

Family influences work ethics

From page 29

Wandera however thinks that employee rewards or a good pay cheque cannot influence someone's work ethics because there are people who are well paid but they are not ethical. So, it is not the issue of money, but values and this starts from home. Just like Wandera, Byakika says good work ethics are influenced by a strong home and school background, which emphasises good values.

"You find that people from homes and schools that emphasised good behaviour, turn out to be good employees. And those who attended schools that were always involved in strikes turn out to be problematic at the work places, they always come late and do not respect the organisational values" she says.

In addition, Byakika says corruption and lack of integrity have eaten into our work ethics and quickly cites an example of workers who would forge electricity metre readings. Besides that, she says you find employees cheating on time when they don't clock in or after they have reported late or not worked.

On the other hand, she blames poor work ethics on the laxity of the human resource departments. She says human resource managers need to know how their role impacts on employees and the performance of the organisation. "They need to do a lot of pre-acting and not pro-acting," she counsels.

What are good work ethics?

Strong work ethics are vital for a company to achieve its goals. Every employee, right from the CEO to entry-level workers, must have a good work ethic to keep the company functioning at its peak.

On that note, Wandera describes work force

STRONG WORK ETHICS ARE VITAL FOR A COMPANY TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS. EVERY EMPLOYEE, MUST HAVE A GOOD WORK ETHIC

ethics as positive attributes of workers, for example; hardworking, dedicated, honest, trustworthiness, being accountable, having an eye for excellence, determination, timeliness, efficiency, dependability are all what good work ethics are about.

Wandera says the attributes are personal characteristics, which are crucial features distinguishing a good worker from a bad one. He stresses that if we are to compete in the East African region and the entire world, we must strengthen these special attributes.

"If we are to score high as a country, our workers must do things differently or better and not just doing things for the sake of it," he cautions.

Programmes on good work ethics

Njuba says Ugandan workers can perform better, but it would require them to change their mindset and character.

"We need to make the workers have a sense of purpose, get role models; people they believe in to help them go forward," she affirms, adding that it is for this reason that the programmes conducted by the institute, help the workers



A woman taking cassava to the market

to discover themselves using three major questions; who am I, what do I want and how do I get there. "We help the workers discover themselves; what they love to do so they start challenging themselves," Njuba explains.

Lyomoki says for the last three years, the workers' MPs have been training workers

to motivate them on good work ethics. For this Labour Day celebration, he says they are going to launch the workers initiative for the elimination of maternal and child health. The main objective is to change the attitude of health workers towards work through monitoring and transforming their ethics. This initiative will be launched at Kamuge Health Centre III in Pallisa district where the national celebrations will take place.

Lyomoki says poor work ethics are just the tip of the iceberg and we must work on the underlying problem. "We must address ethics; values of workers and this can be done through mentoring and training programmes. Bad work ethics start from thoughts, then actions, then it becomes a habit and when not changed, it becomes a bad character," he explains, urging that we need to change the workers' thought patterns through training to change their actions and habits. When their character changes eventually their ethics will change.

According to Wandera, the labour ministry has a policy on mindset change, which involves promoting the right attitude to work.

Byakika says at Coach Africa, their manager objective is ensuring people managers use a coaching model because it has been found to be effective in changing behaviour at the workplace.

In addition, she says they do not encourage a lot of off-self programmes (programmes that are already existing in the companies, like customer care) because it does not give a solution. Instead, they visit the organisation, carry out a survey, talk to managers and staff and come up with programmes that will get to the root of the problem. But if the organisations want the off-self programmes, they include them as well.