

Impact of africa culture and business customs on business management east africa.....



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INTRODUCTION Culture can be defined as a system of values and norms that are shared among a group of people and that when together taken constitute a design for living or doing things for that matter. From this definition we can see that every group of people has a way of going about their daily life. Business is one of those activities that people are involved in on a daily basis.

Starting with an individual to larger groups of people bound together by geographical boundaries will approach business differently. This is mainly a result of cultural influence. Culture influences all aspects of a person's life. And that includes doing business. East Africa or Eastern Africa is the easternmost region of the African continent, variably defined by geography or geopolitics. Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda constitute members of the East African Community (EAC), Burundi and Rwanda are members of the EAC as of 18 June 2007.

The other three countries have been in the community since independence. **LANGUAGE** Communication is very important in business. For people to communicate successfully they need to use language that is understandable to all. In East Africa the two commonly used languages are Swahili and English.

This are however not the only languages spoken in this region. Hundreds of more other indigenous languages are spoken across E. Africa. Swahili Language is the most commonly used language in East Africa; this language gives the East Africans a sense of belonging.

Kiswahili is the language spoken by most people in East Africa. Originally developed on the Coast from a mixture of the African Bantu languages and Arabic, this ancient trading language has become the common language for all the tribes in the area. Learning a few words of Swahili allows better communication and helps build a rapport with the people around the place. It would therefore be preferable for foreigners to learn a few basic Swahili words as this would make them appreciated by the local people. English is commonly used as the official language in any business transaction involving multinational organizations.

Good understanding of the English language will be an advantage since there will be no need to have a translator who might be misleading when negotiating important business dealings. RELIGION Religion impact on all aspects of life. It defines what is wrong and right it basically shape our life. This is then extended to the business environment which is shaped depending on the dominant religion. In East Africa majority of inhabitants are Christians, some are Muslims and a few Hindus. Before these religion came to E.

Africa, the communities had their African traditional religions which some groups of people still follow. Religion impact on business by limiting working days. Those who are Christians not work on Sunday because they worship on this day. Seventh Day Adventist's are not supposed to carry out any kind of activities on Saturday apart from worshipping.

Any kind of business transaction is deemed sinful and a disrespect to the holyday. This a time makes certain organization to lock out potential work

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force because they cannot make it to work on certain days. In Islamic faith it is not right to pay interest or receive interest. When doing a business deals they will not ask for interest from whoever is transacting with. They will not pay interest.

For these reasons financial institutions have come up with specially designed service packages that are in conformity with the Islamic faith. In Kenya both Kenya Commercial Bank and Barclays Bank offer such products. DRESSING Many people tend to judge you by the first impression you give. That's why it is important to give a strong impression when you meet new people for the first time. For a business meeting it is even more important as it might be the determinant as to whether you seal the deal or not.

East Africa does not have any specific dress code because of the influence of western culture. Depending on what kind of work or business you do, you are bound to dress differently. Those who work in the offices and bankers dress formally. Your position in the organization also is a determinant as to how you dress.

People in top management dress formally as they carry the image of the organization. Staffs in the lower rankings dress less formally and at times more casually. The official working days in East Africa are Monday to Friday. Some people however work on weekends. Since it is not official working days most people tend to dress in casual clothes. To have some uniformity and identity either in national functions or international events, individual countries have come up with a national dress which they are supposed to identify with.

The ministry of national heritage in Kenya designed the Kenya national dress but the dress is yet to find its popularity among the citizens. Burundi and Rwanda however have established national dress for their countries.

RESPECTS FOR ELDERERS East Africans consider age to be one of the important factors in life. Generally in Africa age is an asset. It is believed that the older one gets, the wise one becomes.

Older people are considered to have more experience in most aspects of life as compared to younger ones. They occupy most of the higher level positions even though they do not have the qualification. When it comes to making business decisions, young people may not oppose the opinions of elderly people. In the case where they do not agree with the elders' opinions, they are expected to respect them by keeping quiet. That is why most big positions in Africa are being held by elderly people. They are the ones who made all important decisions in different life situations.

In managing business, the idea of having much respect for the elders has great bad implications. First of all it denies the younger people their rights to express their views and opinions when it comes to making business decisions. Younger people tend to have low confidence in the presence of the elders. A good example of this is the leadership of the countries. All the Presidents of the Three Original East Africa countries have an average age of 65 years. This gives the picture of what kind of people are trusted with leadership in any organization including the business ones.

Business organizations in East Africa recruit management teams of mature people. This is because they are trusted with leadership and also because of

their vast experience. This trend is however changing as more and more Chief Executive Officers less than 40 years of age continue to emerge. Commercial Banks such as Standard Chartered have some of the youngest CEOs.

in the region. This does not mean that older generation has been kicked out; they have simply been given another job. They now sit in the boards of this organization to offer advice to the management team. CONCEPT OF TIME MANAGEMENT Ever had of the saying “ There is no hurry in Africa! ” Like any other Africans, the people of East African likes to sit and talk about different issues that affect their lives even if they are suppose to be working. No one stresses on the issues of time.

To them people will always come first and then time will follow. Time is being viewed as flexible. What can not be done today, will be accomplished tomorrow. During meetings or any other gatherings it is not unusual to find people arriving several hours late. The fact of not stressing on time has resulted into a lot of delays when it comes to business management; something that can be done in one week’s time could take months or so for it to be done. In the coastal towns of East Africa like Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Lamu and Malindi are even poorer when it come time management.

It is said that they eat life with a big spoon and will spend the all day under a cocoa nut tree. During working hours they will extend the lunch break to chat with friends not minding that they are eating into working hours. However this is not the case in the capital cities of the East Africa countries.

More and more people from other cultures have come to do business in the capital cities.

Because of this factor time is handled differently. The effect of Asian culture in doing business is a good example in the region. Asian who are more work oriented have successfully run business in the region. This as then challenged the locals to adopt their style of doing business which includes handling time has a major asset which should not be wasted. All these factors have an impact in the business and a good management should find a way of balancing such that the work is done in good time but workers also get to have time to chat to each other.

If this is not handled well then running business in East Africa can be so hard for foreigners who don't know how Africans treat time. GENDER ROLES In the African cultural context there is a clear definition of gender-based roles. There were certain roles which were meant to be under taken by one gender only. The female were to care for the family ensuring that they feed well, cloth and have a clean environment the male gender was to provide food and security to the family. With civilization and Education for both genders this seemed to be drawing to an end. But even with carriers one gender is still perceived to be good at one carrier than the other.

The position of a secretary is meant to be a female job so is nurse. Driving and mechanic are male dominated jobs. Potential work force is locked out of certain carriers just because they are not of the gender supposed to be doing the job. Most business has their top management dominated by male gender.

The female gender with equal or more qualification do not make it to top management simply because they are not male and even if they get there their pay package is often smaller compared to what the male counterpart get. East African governments have attempted to correct this imbalance in the workplace by passing the Equal Employment Opportunity Acts. These acts are meant to protect individual rights and promote employment opportunities and fairness for everyone within the workplace. Even though these acts should have eliminated gender bias in workplaces, I do find that gender bias still prevalent in today's work place.

For example in Kenya the parliament agreed pass a bill that will see in future 30% of women being appointed to Government position. This will follow on in private sector. GREETINGS Like many African regions, East Africans believe greetings to be very important, so it is not unusual to see the people greeting each other repeatedly. Handshaking is very common in East Africa, but it could range from simple handshake to prolonged and sometimes vigorous forms. You could see people greet each others in the street by shaking hands.

Greeting is also used to establish some degree of familiarity. When it comes to business, it is a custom to shake each others hands first before the start of any meetings or negotiations. In most cases, women are expected to receive a handshake, rather than offer one. When both hands are being offered it symbolizes a high level of respect that one has towards the other. Therefore, when doing business with East African or any African businessman expect to greet each other by shaking hands before the official start of the meeting.

This stands as a sign of respect among the two parts. It is extremely rude not to acknowledge a person when entering a room or shake his hand. Hand shake are also import when closing business deals. **DECISION MAKING** In most African regions, decision making is mostly centralized and delegation of authority is almost non existent. People in higher level positions tend to have all the authorities concerning business. They are the once with the final say.

Only in few case you could find a leader delegates his duties to his/her subordinates. The problem is aggravated by high power distance. Those with authorities are not to be challenged even if you are headed for the ditch. This has slowed down the process of making decision especially when it comes to business management.

A small decision can take a long time to be made just because the person in-charge is not around and he/she did not delegate authority to his/her assistance. Decision makers also have the tendency to find silly excuses just to prolong the process of decision making, with their person interest in mind. All these has a great impact when it comes to businesses, since it slows down the business thus affects its performances. It could also lead to lack of customer loyalty due to lost of trust. **CORRUPTION** Corruption is an ethical use of authority for the purpose of personal gain, including situations in which the rules are differently applied to different people.

It also includes bribery, extortion, or embezzlement (cheating, fraud, stealing). Most African countries have a great tendency of practicing corruption. Corruption has become a custom in most offices where by one has to offer something, in-return of a service. To secure a business contract

you must have some kind of connection. Doing business with governments is impractical if you do not have a contact person in the department to push through your tender. There are a number of examples especially in Kenya where successive government have been rocked with corruption scandals crippling the economy.

In 1990s Goldenberg scandal rocked Kenya. Kenyan government was found to have subsidized exports of gold far beyond standard arrangements by paying the company Goldenberg International 35% more (in Kenyan shillings) than their foreign currency earnings. Although it notionally appears that the scheme was intended to earn hard currency for the country, it is estimated to have cost Kenya the equivalent of more than 10% of the country's annual Gross Domestic Product, and it is possible that no or minimal amounts of gold were actually exported. The scandal appears to have involved political corruption at the highest levels of the government of Daniel arap Moi.

Officials in the current government of Mwai Kibaki have also been implicated. Goldenberg was a brain child of business man Paul Kamlesh Pattni who has never been convicted for the economic crimes due to lack of proper evidence. The latest scandal to have rocked the same country is Anglo leasing. The other East Africa countries experience the same problem only they have not been documented. All these practices have a bad reflection on the business environment. Companies' growth will depend on the connections they got rather than its performance.

Corruption tends to impose a great burden on people who can not afford to offer something in-return of the service in the sense that, if one fails to offer bribery he/she will be denied services. CONCLUSION Africa is a big market and more organizations are headed here to do business. Many more businesses are being developed locally. East Africa is well located and will host more of regional headquarters. Unless these business organization understands African culture and how its impact on business, they will find business environment hostile to do business in.

Africans also have a part to play. Some of the cultures they practices are doing more harm that good. Consulting with spirits for bigger profit or whatever they want is not healthy for business. It creates mistrust and hatred among those who are doing business. A good manager will be able to find synergy of African culture and business practice to achieve desired outcomes.

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