

Shifting Paradigms from labour to partnerships: A Panacea to incessant industrial Relations Challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges faced by industrial relations in Nigeria and proposes shifting paradigms from labor to partnerships as a solution. The current labor relations paradigm in Nigeria is characterized by conflict, strikes, and other industrial disputes that harm both workers and employers. The paper argues that a shift towards partnership, collaboration, and cooperation is necessary to create a more harmonious and productive work environment. This new paradigm emphasizes the importance of employee engagement, communication, and the recognition of the shared goals of both labor and management. The paper also explores some of the potential benefits of this approach, such as increased productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness. Finally, the essay concludes with a call for stakeholders to embrace this new paradigm and work together to create a more sustainable and prosperous industrial relations system in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Employee, Employer, Partnership, Industrial Relations, Organization, Policies.*

Introduction

The Nigerian industrial relations landscape has been plagued by a myriad of challenges over the years. The traditional labor relations paradigm, which emphasizes the adversarial relationship between labor and management, has resulted in frequent strikes, lockouts, and other industrial disputes that have harmed both workers and employers. This approach has not only negatively impacted productivity but also stifled economic growth and development. As such, there is a need for a paradigm shift from labor to partnerships to address these challenges and create a more harmonious and productive work environment in Nigeria. This paper explores the potential benefits of this approach, its challenges, and its implications for stakeholders in the Nigerian industrial relations system. It is hoped that this paper will provide insights and recommendations to policymakers, employers, and workers' representatives on how to embrace this new paradigm and foster a more sustainable and prosperous industrial relations system in Nigeria.

Shifting paradigms from labor to partnerships is a relatively recent development in the field of organizational management and leadership. Traditionally, the relationship between employers and employees has been characterized by a hierarchical power dynamic, with employers dictating the terms of employment and employees providing their labor in exchange for wages.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition that this traditional model of employment is no longer effective in today's rapidly changing and complex business environment. Instead, there is a need for more collaborative and partnership-based relationships between employers and employees. This shift in perspective has been driven by a number of factors,



including changing social attitudes towards work and employment, the rise of the knowledge economy, and the increasing importance of teamwork and collaboration in the workplace. As a result, many organizations are now exploring new models of partnership-based employment that focus on empowering employees, fostering creativity and innovation, and building stronger relationships between employers and their workforce. This shift towards partnership-based employment has significant implications for organizational management and leadership. It requires a fundamental rethinking of traditional hierarchical power structures and a greater emphasis on collaboration, communication, and mutual trust and respect. As such, it represents a significant paradigm shift in the way that organizations are managed and led, and one that is likely to continue to shape the future of work for many years to come.

Developments in contemporary times have raised the consciousness of stakeholders like academicians, opinion molders and policy makers on the continuous crisis that have continued to characterized the industrial relations climate. Nigeria, a West African country is not excluded from this incessant mirage as the nation has experienced its fair share of industrial relations turbulence in recent times. Historical pointers have shown a timeline of industrial crisis between the various segments in the various sectors of the economy. The Nigerian medical association (NMA) and the academic staff union of universities (ASUU) are two public sector unions that have continued to be in a long run perennial battle with their employers who are the government. The last being the academic staff union of universities which dragged on for close to twelve calendar months. The causes of these industrial actions revolves around unfair working conditions and unfavorable employment terms. The various sectorial unions finds it easy to embark on industrial actions

Revised: 2 April 2023

Final Accepted for publication: 10 April 2023

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whenever there are concerns about monetary and occupational health issues usually termed as hazard. They have also cited the exploitative mode of operations of the management of most organizations as motives behind their various militant actions (Agbakwuru, 2021).

Disturbance in the industrial relations system appears to be a constant decimal as far as Nigeria is concerned. These growing menace is detrimental to growth of industrial relations in Nigeria if allowed to continue. It is against this background that this paper seeks to bare thoughts on alternative approaches towards possible solution.

1.0 Historical Overview of Labor Relations in Nigeria

The history of labor relations in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era when workers began to organize themselves against exploitation by their employers. During this period, the labor movement was largely dominated by European trade unions that represented the interests of white-collar workers. However, with the emergence of Nigerian nationalism and the struggle for independence in the 1940s and 1950s, there was a shift towards the formation of indigenous trade unions that fought for the rights of both skilled and unskilled workers. Some of the prominent labor leaders during this period include Michael Imoudu and Joseph Ayo Babalola.

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the government passed several labor laws aimed at protecting workers' rights and improving their working conditions. These laws also provided for the establishment of the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC), which became the umbrella body for all trade unions in the country. During the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s, labor relations were characterized by frequent strikes and protests by workers against the government's

policies, including wage cuts and high inflation rates. However, with the return to civilian rule in 1999, there was a renewed focus on reforming the labor sector through the adoption of new labor laws and the restructuring of the NTUC.

Today, labor relations in Nigeria continue to be shaped by various factors, including globalization, economic reforms, and the increasing demand for decent work and social protection for workers. While there have been significant improvements in workers' rights and working conditions over the years, challenges such as unemployment, underemployment, and informal employment remain major issues that need to be addressed.

1.1 The Traditional Adversarial Model of Industrial Relations

A United States Department of Labour Survey in 2018 noted that the traditional adversarial model of industrial relations is a framework that sees the relationship between employers and employees as inherently conflictual, with each party pursuing their own interests at the expense of the other. This model assumes that labor and management have fundamentally opposing goals and that the only way to resolve disputes between them is through confrontation and negotiation. Under this model, unions play a critical role in protecting workers' interests by engaging in collective bargaining with employers to secure better wages, benefits, and working conditions. Employers, on the other hand, are viewed as seeking to maximize profits by minimizing labor costs and maximizing productivity.

The traditional adversarial model assumes that the balance of power between labor and management is heavily skewed towards employers, leading to frequent strikes and other forms of

industrial action by workers as they seek to redress the power imbalance. Critics of the adversarial model argue that it can lead to a destructive cycle of conflict and mistrust between labor and management, ultimately harming both parties and damaging the overall economy. They advocate for models of industrial relations that emphasize cooperation, collaboration, and mutual gains, rather than confrontation and conflict (Fanisi & Onoja (2020).

However, the traditional adversarial model continues to be relevant in many contexts, particularly in industries where workers have little bargaining power or face significant economic and social disadvantages.

1.2 The Emergence of Partnership-Based Approaches

According to the HBR (2019), the emergence of partnership-based approaches to industrial relations is a reaction to the limitations of the traditional adversarial model. Partnership-based approaches seek to move beyond the confrontational and zero-sum mindset of the traditional model by promoting collaboration, cooperation, and mutual gains between labor and management. Under partnership-based approaches, employers and employees are viewed as interdependent partners with shared interests in improving organizational performance, productivity, and competitiveness. This approach recognizes that improved working conditions and employee well-being can lead to better job satisfaction, increased motivation, and higher levels of productivity, which benefit both workers and employers.

Partnership-based approaches also emphasize the importance of building trust and open communication between labor and management. This involves creating structures and processes

for ongoing dialogue and consultation between workers and management, such as joint committees or labor-management councils.

One key feature of partnership-based approaches is the emphasis on employee involvement and participation in decision-making. This can take various forms, including participatory decision-making, team-based problem-solving, and employee empowerment initiatives. There are several benefits to partnership-based approaches, including increased job satisfaction, greater employee engagement, reduced turnover rates, and improved organizational performance. However, these approaches require significant commitment from both labor and management to build trust, share information, and collaborate effectively. Partnership-based approaches represent a significant shift away from the traditional adversarial model of industrial relations towards a more collaborative and inclusive approach that recognizes the importance of shared goals and mutual gains (US department of labour

1.3 The Dynamics of Labour Union- Management Partnership

There appears to be recent interests globally particularly in the United Kingdom on the need to develop a collaborative or partnership relationship between labour union and management. While some scholars have opined that union management partnership is possible, some have expressed fears about its practicality as the world has fully raced into a liberalized market economy where the modus for operating a business enterprises are dependent on some prevailing situations orchestrated by both internal and external environments (Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018). In Britain, industrial relations experts view labour union-management partnership as a pluralist venture aimed promoting a collaborating relationship between actors of industrial relations

Received: 23 March 2023

Revised: 2 April 2023

Final Accepted for publication: 10 April 2023

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(Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004). These views were buttressed by Johnstone, Ackers and Wilkinson (2009) who made mutual gains argument in support for the labour union-management partnership. However, others have argued against such ideas citing that it goes against the fundamentals of capitalism and will only breed a more aggressive and militant union. In addition, it was also thought that the multidimensional nature of neoliberal capitalism, statutory regulations and the existence of multinational companies will not allow the idea to become realistic. These views as expressed are quite far from the traditional relationship between employees and management which produces economic inefficiency- hostility and animosity between employer and employee and thus leads to a decrease in productivity. A lower level of productivity connotes lower employee rewards and job satisfaction components. Adversarial unionism has also been criticized because it emphasizes the advancement of material needs such as pay, benefits, job security, and working conditions to the detriment of more fundamental issues such as fairness and equity.

Barton (1997) offered insights into the labour union management partnership discourse where he analyzed the potential benefits as strategic and of extreme importance. He opined that management and employees have peculiar and different interests in the organization but are greatly reliant on each other in the achievement of key organizational objectives. The current pace of technological advancement made the reliability role of each of the actors imperative. Furthermore, the traditional essence of establishing labour union in an enterprise are to negotiate better wage packages, improved working conditions while also guaranteeing job security against management high-handedness in their efforts to deliver quality goods and services to the public.

It is therefore pertinent for management of organizations to apply requisite wisdom in the structuring of highly competitive wage structure, additional motivational incentives, top-notch working space and customized opportunities so that an employee can carry out his or her responsibilities well.

A sizeable number of researches like that which was carried out by Balsler, Deborah and Winkler in 2012 discovered that labour –management collaborative partnerships are business sensitive strategies that motivates employees and employers towards deriving a more beneficial relationship at workplace in a substantial way. The benefits of an employee in this relationship will include a more improved job satisfaction, a more robust engagement at workplace, peaceful industrial relations climate, competitive wages, on the job training, retention and skills development cum growth. The labour union benefits includes but not limited to increased fraternity with management, employee commitment to tasks, higher enrolment rate. Management also stands a chance to benefit by way of increased productivity, highly graded services, more profitability, a satisfied workforce and more retention of employees. The overall target of this partnerships are a more conducive workplace culture and industrial relations climate which in turn drives corporate productivity.

2.1 Historical Models of Labour Union- Management Partnerships

Evidences abounds to show that there are actually positive results when there is an established partnership between employee and the employer. This does not only translate to productivity and improvement in product quality but will also ensure the effective satisfaction of an employee while

also reducing the rate of turnover. This allows the firm to operate effectively in a competitive market (Ostrowsky, 2005)

Precedence have also shown the history of labor union - management partnership. Evidence was a case of four medical service providers in California, San Rafael, Vermont and New-York who subscribed to a union –management partnership idea. As a result of their collaboration in various service providing units of the respective hospitals, it materialized into great productivity. Clinical processes. Labor union relations, running cost savings and workplace environment were the areas identified as gaining positive improvement courtesy of the labour-employee partnership (Lazes et al, 2012). Also Kaiser Permanente and an association of Permanente labour union signed an agreement that allows the formation of unit based team in that organization in 2010. This agreement after being signed by parties saw physicians, managers, and senior employees working cooperatively to solve key organizational challenges and improving performances (Eaton et al, 2011). Furthermore, less than two decades ago, a player in the health sector, Maimonides medical center Brooklyn signed a labour-management partnership that was implemented across all departments in the hospital in year 2003. The partnership revolves around “ Mutual Respect” in operating theatre rooms with an idea of reducing conflicts and disruptive behaviors amongst employees. After implementation, the aim of the partnership was achieved as there was a drastic reduction in conflict and subsequent development of a positive relationship (Givan, 2011).

Records also have it that U.S motor manufacturing firm, Saturn was a product of an experiment with general motors (GM) and United Auto Workers (UAW) union. This partnership was basically

to foster participation in the management of the organization at all levels. This agreement includes over 700 workgroups and a larger part of management. This partnership played a significant role in the performance of the brand “Saturn” while also building a strong workforce with conflict resolution skills, problem solving initiative and improvement in the quality of service. This made the management of Saturn to treat employees as influential stakeholders in the business (Kochan, Thomas & Rubenstein, 2000).

2.2 Strategic Development of Labor-Management Partnerships

Social exchange theoretical assumptions by Blau (1964) gives credence to the benefits and risks associated with the relationship between the two parties in an industrial relationship. The organizational psychologist postulated that “ if the costs of a cooperation be it romantic, business or professional exceeds the anticipated rewards or not reciprocated, the chances of ending such cooperation lies ahead. Blau in his study on social exchange was also of the view that most thriving of relationships were the ones where the parties involved in are on the same level as regards benefits resulting from same collaboration. Therefore, collaborative relationships between labor and union can be articulated into both the social exchange theory due to the fact that they both offers a kind of reciprocatory value in the relationship which portends prospects in an organization (Fanisi, 2020).

Prosperous labour –management relationships that is built around workforce partnerships relies on what each of the actor brings to the table in the various organizational processes. Every effective manpower collaborations are built upon values shared by the various actors in the

employment relationship. Ideally, labor and management should be potential and natural partners at workplace. Employers should do this by building a highly skilled talent bank by identifying those who have practical knowledge for a particular job and task. While also paying high premium on the development of the potentials of existing and newly signed employees in any organization. All these and more increases the level of workplace partnership between employers and employees. The following are suggested guidelines towards building a sustainable employee – employers partnerships:

Redefining Traditional Paradigms

It is right historically that employers and employees have never shared same objectives, meaning they have always been adversarial in their relationships. It is obvious that in the past, they have never shared same goals and their dedication toward enterprise success differs. It is however important to state that the time has come for both parties to align perspectives, integrate visions and focus on interactional corporation towards the achievements of organizational goals. Management must also strive to incorporate employees who visionary leaders into the implementation team of the organization.

Refocus on Labor Markets

Employers must take into cognizance of the realities that the labour market is changing. It is changing due to the fact that the demand for highly skilled and technologically inclined employees is on the rise. It is only firms that have the financial resources that has the ability to retain employees with special skills that drives productivity. Even at that, new ventures shall continue to

spring up daily which implies that should an organization possess the financial resources to attract the same employee, the employees move from one place to the other. Therefore, employers must strive hard to engage a partnership model with employees from the stages of recruitment to the stages of training and development. This will guarantee unrivaled productivity on the side of the enterprise.

Provide Route to Academic Achievement

Employers in contemporary times must as a matter of policy provide employees who are not fully equipped with the requisite academic qualifications with academic opportunities. This is due to the fact an investment on an employee will also be to the benefit of the employers on the long run. Therefore, it is expedient on employers that are fast thinkers to search for academic opportunities which are relevant to the various tasks in the organization thereby offering same to the employees so as to upgrade their skills. This way, the employee sees himself as an integral part of the organization and will forever be willing to offer its service for as long as the employer needs them. This also builds a sense of belonging in the employees and they will also see themselves as partners in the business.

Development of Career Progression Path

Firms that are willing develop a great employee – employer partnership must go over board by showing employees progression path towards their career development. An employee who is provided with a path where more income can flow in will naturally see himself as an integral part of the organization. When an employee sees a career path wherever they are than going

elsewhere derailing from that path. Today's unions would fit well as contributing partners in the development of an organization and would add value to the systemic improvement of organizational processes. This they can only do by seeing themselves as a part and parcel of the organization and not just a union member. Management can help facilitate this mindset. Indeed, in a time of shrinking resources, new partners and new thinking should be encouraged and welcomed by all.

Behavioral Changes in Management and Employee Representatives

The major priorities required to build a collaborative relationship between employee and the employers includes changing patterns and behaviors obtainable at workplace. These behavioral changes includes developing new organizational culture, leadership styles and effective communications. They must be able to identify and handle differences in a way that will not translate into conflict and above all must be able to manage diversities at workplace. Furthermore, there should be mutual trusts amongst employee and the employer. This way, a partnership is established at work.

Build a Foundation of Trust

Building trust is essential for any successful partnership. Management should take the time to understand the concerns and perspectives of the union and work collaboratively to address them.

Foster Open Communication

Communication is key to building strong partnerships. Management should establish regular channels of communication with the union, such as regular meetings or joint committees.

Focus on Shared Goals

Partnership-based relationships should be built around shared goals and objectives. Management and unions should work together to identify areas of mutual interest and develop strategies to achieve them.

Encourage Employee Involvement

Engaging employees in the partnership process can help to build a sense of ownership and commitment. Management should involve union representatives in decision-making processes and provide opportunities for employees to provide feedback and input.

Address Conflicts Constructively: Conflicts are inevitable in any partnership. It's important to address conflicts constructively by listening to all perspectives, identifying areas of agreement, and developing solutions that meet the needs of all parties.

Provide Training and Support

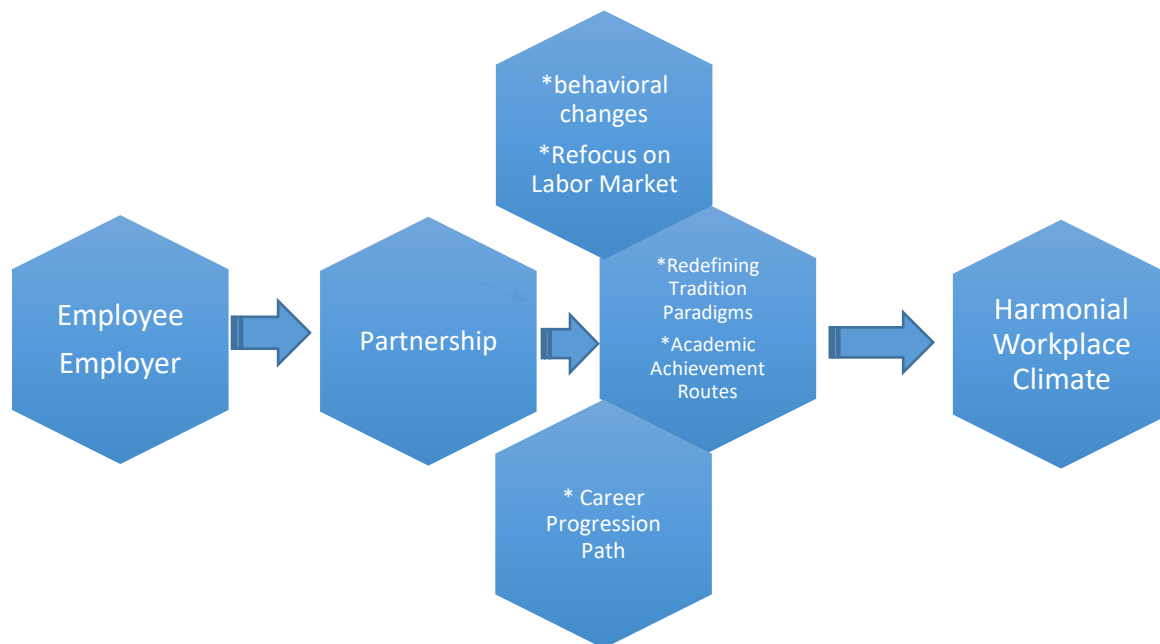
Management should provide training and support to employees and union representatives to help them develop the skills and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in the partnership process.

Celebrate Successes

Celebrating successes can help to build momentum and strengthen the partnership over time. Management should recognize and celebrate achievements that result from the partnership, such as increased productivity or improved working conditions.

Framework for Employer – Employee Partnerships

Fig: 1



Source: Author's Conceptualization (2023)

Fig 1 above illustrates the link employers and employees as it relates to building workplace partnerships towards the building of a harmonial workplace climate. it also shows the various strategies required for building and sustaining the partnerships.

Conclusion

Empirical facts gathered have showed employee- employer partnership is a possibility. This is due to large body of evidence shown in extant literatures on the subject matter. However, researches shows that its practicability have only been experimented in western developed nations with sufficient evidences from the United Kingdom and the United States. This practices are strange in Africa, in particular Nigeria. Stakeholders have continuously expressed worry over the growing pace of industrial conflicts in Nigeria. It is however imperative that experts in the human resources and industrial relations departments of multinational corporations to adapt so many of these practices as being operated in some of the western countries. This will aid the expedite growth of the employer-employee interaction at workplace and will speedily address development challenges on the side of the organization. Policy makers and relevant Government agencies must also as a matter of urgency incorporate these practices into future policy formulation at the Federal, State and Local Government Levels. It is the thought of the researcher that this paper will provide literature framework for future studies.

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