



## OFFICE MANAGERS PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IMPLICATION ON PERFORMANCE; A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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**Abstract:** - Notwithstanding the budding concern of research in business and office ethics, issues relating to unethical practices have continued to be apparent in organizations. The focus of this paper is directed at undertaking an in-depth review on the concept of ethics, the office manager and the office, office ethics, unethical practices and factors that contributes to unethical practices in the office. The paper revealed however that several internal and external factors contribute to the heightened rate of unethical practices in Nigerian offices. The study concludes that upholding ethical practices in the offices enhances better performance of the office manager in the office. The study recommends that organizations should design an effective ethical program and ensure ethical conducts are rewarded and discipline unethical conducts. Moreso, the study recommends a fair remuneration for employee to forestall need pressure that makes them compromise as an observed fact in the paper.

**Keyword:** Office, ethics, office manager, performance

**Introduction:** Over decades the concept of unethical conducts in the office is often seen as a cankerworm that eats up the goodwill of most organization and this has served as a major setback to many functional organizations. Kehinde (2010) is of the view that in contemporary times many organizations are confronted with several challenges which are

evidence in illegal and unethical business practices in transactions. In lieu of the foregoing, organizations have designed ethical codes to deal with challenging ethical issues. Ethical Code is a set of moral principles which are designed by organization to modify employee behaviours both within and outside the organization or workplace. No doubt, ethical behaviors in the workplace have been seen to have aided companies meet up its profit margin, this is a common measure of organizational performance as captured in organization performance literatures. Ethics is very important to every organization just as its mission statement. Sam (n.d) avers that every business

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has certain guiding principle to which its employees must stick on; these principles are outlined in the employee's handbook.

Unethical conducts in the workplace is a generic problem faced by organization around the globe even in the western countries over years, though, not as commonly observed in most African countries. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) survey revealed that a significant number of American companies are involved in bribery. "Over 400 U.S. Companies admitted to making questionable or illegal payments to foreign government officials, politicians and political parties" (United States Department of Justice 2006). Managers do not show keen interest in ascertaining whether or not their actions are right or wrong and being less concerned with the level of employees understanding of the term ethics while the level of compliance is relatively low, (Oladunni 2002).

However, there is a level of consensus around the globe as organizations strive to maintain ethical standard. Steinberg (1994) argued that ethics is an "ordinary decency" which covers integrity, honesty and fairness. "Behaving in an ethical manner is seen as part of the social responsibility of organization, which itself depends on the philosophy that organizations ought to impact the society in ways that goes beyond the usual profit maximization objective" (Adenubi 2000). It is often argued in many instances that, it is in the interest of an organization to behave in a way that recognizes the need for moral and ethical content in managerial decision as this will benefit the organization especially in the long run.

**Conceptual Review on Ethics:** The concept ethics has a hydra-head meaning and as such it has been multifariously defined by various scholars. Ugoji (2006) traced the history of ethics and described its inception as old as mankind. Most commonly, the word ethics refers to "a code or set of principles by which men live" (Popkin and Stroll 1979). The nature and meaning of ethics draws its root from a latin word "ETHICUS" and Greek "ETHICOS"

which both draws its origin from "Ethos" meaning character or ideal standards of behaviour (Ugoji 2006). In addition she stated that ethics consists of standards of behaviour acceptable to the society; it makes moral judgments of human conducts. It examines the question of what actions are morally right, or wrong, good or bad, fair and proper.

It's worthy of note that the intent of ethics is to identify the rules that governs people behaviour. Individual values are the underlying and guiding principles of every ethical decision. However, ethics becomes a complex issue when a situation dictates that one value surpass others. Especially when what is considered ethical to a certain group of society is not to another sect. Therefore, for any issue to be ethical and acceptable there must be consensus among the members of that organization or society. Ethics is a "system of moral principles, rules and conduct guiding human behaviors" (Oxford Dictionary 1974).

The role ethics plays to enhance better performance in the office cannot be slighted. This is because ethics establish the goals that organization should pursue, and the way in which people inside organizations should behave to actualize these set goals. Due to the fact that ethics deals with human beings Ugoji further traces the sources of ethics to genetic inheritance, religion, legal system, philosophical system, code of conduct, and cultural experience.

**Ethical Theories:** Ugoji (2006), posits that Ethics also referred to moral philosophy is made up of three theoretical branches which are the meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics.

-**Meta-ethics** is concerned with the study of origin and meaning of ethical concepts. It studies and proffers answers of basic questions concerning the nature and origin of good and evil. Gamer and Rosen (1967) identified three meta-ethical problems which includes 1. What is the meaning of moral terms or judgment? 2. What is the nature of moral judgment? 3. How is moral judgment supported or defended.

**-Normative ethics:** this branch of ethics deals with practical tasks that are to arrive through moral standards which regulate right and wrong conduct. It seeks to realistically proscribe evil to cherish good. This also entails articulating the good habits that we should acquire. For instance, “the Golden rule which states that we should do to others what we want others to do to us”.

**-Applied ethics:** this is the aspect that deals with analysis of specific controversial moral issues by using the tools of meta-ethics and normative ethical theory.

Having been cleared that every organization has codes of conduct most times referred to as the organizational culture which dictates the pattern of behaviour of its employee, it is also wise to mention that ethical considerations on the job can be quite sticky. This is especially, when an employee is found in a **cognitive dissonance**; that is, being caught up in a cross road as a result of the conflict between individual values and that of the organization's. Ethical behaviour is acting in ways that are consistent with one's personal values and the common values of the organization and society, (Nielsen, 1999a). “Unethical behaviour by employees can affect individuals, work teams, and even the organization” (Arlow, 2000). Organizations thus depend on individuals to act ethically. Moreso, Kehinde (2010) posits that organizational climate contributes to the ethical conducts of every organization. Climate is referred to as the shared set of values and principles that define what correct behavior is and how ethical issues will be handled. According to Hunt (1991), Robbins (2001) some factors that may put emphasis on in different ethical climates of organizations are: personal self interest; company profit; operating efficiency; individual friendships; team interest; social responsibility; personal morality; Rules and standard procedures; Laws and professional codes e.t.c.

**Office Manager and the Office:** The role of the secretary now referred to as “Office Manager” towards the working of every organization and

contribution towards national development cannot be over accentuated. Though the occupational title of the professional secretary is populated and treated with levity due to the mixed understanding of who a professional secretary is. This has made most people to call any one who sits at the entrance of an office having knowledge of the computer with typing skill learned at a road side computer training centre as a secretary, which ought not to be so because that person is just an office worker who possibly has mastery of one of the numerous qualities and skills a secretary- has or should be called a typist, probably due to ignorance of not knowing who actually is a secretary. This misconception and numerous management functions effectively undertaken in the office necessitated the nomenclatural change of secretary-ship to office manager.

The term secretary emanates from a Medieval Latin word “secretarius” which denotes a “confidential employee” and this Latin word was derived from another Latin word “secretus” meaning secret (Webster's Dictionary 1995). The National Secretaries Association of America (NSAA) defines a secretary “as assistance to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who displays, initiative, exercise judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of his/her authority” (Nwosu 1997). From this definition you will agree with me that the true occupational title of a professional secretary goes beyond a typist or a stenographer. For one to be called a secretary in the professional sense, he/she must have gotten a professional training in a formal educational institution to learn various office skills including ability to write short hand, knowledge in handling files correspondence and its likes. Such person must also be abreast with the ethics of the profession as well as management analytical decision making abilities to be qualified for that title.

The place of the office manager in the office cannot be overlooked. The office manager is an

esteemed worker in the office amongst others who serves as the wheel of the business or organization to turn. although, the activities of the office manager may be termed unproductive in the sense that they do not actually involve in the direct production activities, but it is also important to note that nothing can ever be produced without the effort of the secretary to gather, receive, store, and retrieving records for effective communication between the various units or departments and outsiders. Just as the office is described as the engine room or nucleus of any organization, so is the office manager to the office. Shaw cited in Nwosu (2002) defines an office as any place where procedures concerned with the receipt, transmittal, production, reproduction; processing, storage and retrieval of information are carried out habitually. The secretary plays an important role in the organization and national development in the sense that the secretary is involved in the work of the office which involves the collection of information, the sorting, processing, classifying, recording of information and the interpretation of information, diffusion of information and the prediction of the business including safe guarding of its assets, (Nwosu 1997). From the exposition of the concept and its origin it's clear that office manager is a highly principled and skilled individual that operates in the management team. As a purposefully trained and well-grounded individual in secretarial skill and administrative functions, the role of the secretary is multifaceted one and cannot be regimented to one area of administrative activities (Ugoji 2006). Recognizing the sensitive nature of the secretarial position in an organization, and because so much trust is imposed on him by employers, clients and the public the need for the office manager to be ethical becomes very paramount.

**Review on Office Manager's Ethics:** It has been observed that every profession has its code of conducts stipulated to guide the behaviors of its members. The office manager's profession is

not an exception knowing the nobility and esteemed nature of the profession. It also has ethics which stipulates acceptable standard for its members. This aspect of the paper x-rays the dos-and-dons or the expected mode of conduct for office manager in the office.

Ugoji (2006), described the ethics of professional secretary- office manager as those moral principles relating to the job of the office manager which he is obliged to accept upon receiving the appointment. They are discussed below.

- ✓ **Confidentiality:** going by the latin offshoot of the word "secretarius" which has been interpreted as 'confidential employee'. A secretary must always keep information confidential about the firm he work for and clients. Never reveal sensitive information even if you are in a discussion where everyone is wondering what is happening and you have facts.
- ✓ **Honesty:** do not take credit for something you did not do and do not let someone else enjoy the credit for your efforts. It also involves telling the truth always. This way you gain credibility before your boss and other employee.
- ✓ **Loyalty:** always be loyal to your boss and company. Never sell them out at any cost. On the other hand, your boss also should prove that he is worthy of your loyalty. Don't be caught up in the office gossips.
- ✓ **Reliability:** show in your timely delivery of task or job that you can be relied on. Also, endeavor to be punctual at work and meetings always and remembering to take relevant documents along.
- ✓ **Responsibility:** prove that you are responsible by setting priority and carrying out-tasks in a timely manner. In other words, always meet death lines.
- ✓ **Work unsupervised:** always keep your work up to date and be productive. Meet deadlines. Everyday write out the list of tasks you need to perform to ensure none is overlooked.

- ✓ **Co-operative:** Be willing to assist and share your expertise knowledge with colleagues when need arise but learn when to say no tactfully.
- ✓ **Flexibility:** you must be flexible with your work schedule and arrangement with your boss. The best jobs are where you have a give and take arrangement. You may never know when you will need some time off.
- ✓ **Multi-Skilling:** Ensure to learn on the job especially about computer programmes and other job functions in the organization. You may just need this knowledge when you apply for advancement.
- ✓ **Bribery;** avoid receiving Greek gifts or favor from clients just in case there's an underlying reason. Always endeavor to comply with policies and procedures in the organization.

However, due to the fact that the theme borders on office ethics its important to have a review of some ethical office conduct. Corporate values, purpose, and practices are the basis for organization's long range of achievement and continued growth. According to Odger and Keeling (2000), one that consistently produces high quality products or services, treats employees with respect, and incorporate its values as foundation and culture of its business. Such office ethics as outlined by Josephson Ethics Institute are; honesty, integrity, trustworthy, loyalty, fairness, concern and respect for others, being committed to excellence, leadership, reputation, morale and accountability.

#### **Unethical Conducts in Nigerian Offices:**

Today, many African Nations are faced with the crisis that is making the competitive strength of the business organization more challenging (Kehinde 2006). This unethical behavior by employees permeates every level of the organization. Akinbayo, (2000) opined that employees indulge in stealing company's product and using company's service without authorization. There is a great concern of the quality of ethical conduct in all organization all

over the world in which Nigeria is not an exemption (Kolade 1999).

Survey result in 2010 among U.K and Europe companies revealed that the most momentous ethical issues faced with organizations are bribery, corruption and facilitation payments; whistle blowing/speaking up and discrimination, harassment or bullying (Webley, Basran, Hayward & Harris, 2011).

Apart from the listed unethical conducts in firms this paper identifies and discusses some of such unethical behaviors so as to discourage office workers from them to enhance a better performance.

1. **Romance in the office:** There is no doubt that every working class person spent more reasonable hours of his time in the office than he/she does at home. Many workers spend a large percentage of their walking hours develop and maintain friendships with colleagues that last beyond office hours and sometimes even the job itself (Bruce 2008). There is no doubt, many workers sees the office as the most logical scene to engage in romance or hookup. The assumption is that fellow employees are better-off to share our goals and values than total strangers. Moreover, people tend to have a closer tie at work than they do in clubs, bars, and the Internet. Bruce posited that all these reasons may prompt people to pursue romance with a co-worker, an assistant, or boss. But there are many more compelling reasons why that should not be encouraged in the workplace. Office romances causes more damages than the potential benefits. Reason being that most romantic relationships do not work out, if that is the case the implications is that when you lose the game of love at the office, you still have to face the other person day after day. That constant reminder of a relationship that didn't work out is a painful burden to bear, and human relations in the organization as well as the overall work process and productivity is hampered, This also affects the individual performance of

the employee, the reason is that the two parties are still compelled to work in the same place (Bruce 2008). On the other hand, time that should have been committed to work is used on romance. Therefore, romance in the office is unethical and should be disabused.

2. **Promotion favoritism:** The recognized route or criteria for promotion in any functional organization has always been years of service and performance depending on the organizational policies and guideline for promotion. But it bits my imagination that in most organization those in the elm of affairs to appraise workers for promotion resort to discrimination in terms of races, cliques etc. this is an unethical behavior that must be disabused in organization.
3. **Bribery/ Greek gift:** the issue of bribery or presentation of gift to buy favour from those in public offices is very pronounced in every organization especially government. Honors, awards, promotion etc are no longer based on who deserves it but by who rubs my hand. As a result there is no hard work and healthy competition in the offices, because they rather prefer resorting to bribery. This is also the case in our higher institutions.
4. **Diverting of organizational resources for personal use:** this is also another unethical practices seen in Nigeria organization, and is more pronounced in the public sector due to lack of probing and accountability on office holders in the public sector. Such practices like using fund meant to run public office to personal use.

#### **Factors that Promotes Unethical Conducts**

There are numerous contributing factors to unethical behaviours in the offices, some are reviewed bellow.

1. **Managers/ leaders Influence:** leadership of organization to a great extent determines whether employees embrace company's values or not in their disposition. If managers and top leaders don't model ethical behavior or enforce rules fairly, employees lose trust in them. Studies also show that people are more likely to

override their own ethical concerns if their manager doesn't share those concerns (Dori 2014). Harned revealed that survey results by Ethics Resource Center shows managers are responsible for 60% of workplace misconduct. Top managers are more likely to break the rules than lower-level managers, (National Business Ethics Survey).

2. **Organizational culture:** the culture of the organization stipulates the ethics of that organization, it is the totality of the organizational values, believes and policies put in place to guide its operations. If the rules and policies of the organization are loosed, and offenders are not due punished as stipulated. It encourages more unethical conducts in the office.

3. **Rewarding of unethical conducts:** The high tendency of committing unethical practices in work places is because of organizations failure to implement the rule in punishing violators squarely, but rather victimize good corporate citizens who blows whistle on organizational wrongdoing due to organization politics or cliques (Kehinde 2010). Jansen and Von-Glinow (1985) explain that “organizations tend to develop counter norms, accepted organizational practices, which are contrary to prevailing ethical standards, this act as discouragement to lots of office workers who due to their values are trying to be ethical”.

4. **Pressure and Need force:** I observed that some of those unethical behaviors exhibited by workers are as a result of their need force that is needed to be met. This happen most often in organization where the welfare of its staff are neglected; where salaries and wages are not paid regularly or timely, workers earns below their responsibilities. Existing literatures on corporate illegality indicates that pressure and needs unmet forces organizational members to behave unethically and develop corresponding rationalizations; however, according to recent research this explanation only accounts for illegal acts in some cases (Baucus and Near, 1999).

**The Way Forward/Recommendations:** The unethical practice in Nigerian offices that has rocked many organizations is not without hope. Hishikawa (2000), reports that Foreign Corrupt Practices Act was signed into law to restore faith in American business. Nigeria surely has hope if these recommendations are implemented by industrial actors.

**Designing of Effective Ethical Programs:** Frank & Pitman (3003) reveals that to create a code of ethics program, an organization must define its most important values and set an accepted standard of behavior, establish structural system and processes to ensure that the code is implemented and effective. Ideally, code is developed through a process where boards and senior management actively debate and decide core values, roles, responsibilities, expectations, and behavioral standards. Though, Compliance can be daunting, but it is an opportunity to establish and promote operational excellence throughout the entire organization and significantly improve the overall operational performance. Bello (2012) in addition to the forgoing opined that Organizations should ensure that all employees participate in ethics training programmes. This will offer employees the opportunity to learn and evaluate the impact of ethics on activities and organizational performance.

**Advocating ethics in the office:** Apart from designing ethical programme and ensuring employee to participate, it is also needful for the management to consistently sensitize and talk about ethical practices and its place to enhance better performance.

**Fair Remuneration:** base on the findings as stated above that need pressure is also responsible for unethical practices. This paper recommends that employers in addition to designing an effective ethics program need to determine remuneration of its employees fairly base on the standard of living of the society and also putting into consideration of their qualification. More so, salaries and wages should be paid to workers promptly.

**Rewarding of ethical conduct and discipline unethical conducts.** Organizations should seek ways to promote and compensate employees who upholds good reputation and maintain ethical conducts; this can influence customers and co-workers positively (Bello 2012).

**Organizations should strive to hire ethical people.** Organizations should focus on ethical skills along with the technical skills in the recruitment screening process. Information on potential employee ethical behaviour can be obtained from resumes, reference checks, background checks and integrity test.

**Conclusion:** Ethical issues in the office are a worldwide phenomenon as earlier mentioned in the introduction. It is an important issue to corporate organization; and corporate leaders must take proactive measures to end this malaise which unethical practices in the offices have cost organization to enhance a better performance. It is however an identified truth that ethical practice in the office proceeds better performance and in the long run lead to organizational growth (Collins, 2010). Therefore, leaders must create an ethically friendly work environment for all employees, communicate ethical issues, as well as becoming role models and put mechanism in place for the development of employees.

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