East African Scholars Journal of Economics, Business and Management
(An Open Access, International, Indexed, Peer-Reviewed Journal)
A Publication of East African Scholars Publisher, Kenya
www.easpublisher.com

Review Article

Re-invigorating Business Education curriculum for enhanced service delivery: The place of soft skills

Frank Alaba Ogedengbe (PhD)[1], Dr. Sunny G. Eshiotse[2]
[1]Department of Business Administration, Michael and Cecilia Ibru University, Agbarha-Otor, Nigeria
[2]Department of Languages, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author
Frank Alaba Ogedengbe
Article History
Received: 05.12.2018 | Accepted: 22.12.2018 | Published: 30.12.2018 | DOI: 10.36349/easjebm.2018.v01i03.007

Abstract: Individuals, organizations and governments acknowledge the invaluable contributions of training to human capital development, which reflect in improved service delivery and turn-over. Yearly, organizations commit substantial parts of their appropriations to both training and re-training of staff. Cursory observation confirms that much of Business curriculum appears to focus on concepts, theories and procedures to the neglect of those fine-grain soft skills which help create a warm work-place atmosphere and enhance retention of quality clientele. Should soft skills not be given respectable coverage in a Business education curriculum? This paper, using the literature method, examines the nature and potential contributions of soft skills to quality service delivery. Providers, operators, financiers of Business education and employers of the products need to sit down and identify soft skills considered to be germane to the dispensing of relationship skills so that they can be fully built into Business curriculum. As much as possible, rich contents in soft skills, especially good telephone habits for help-line staff, good email-writing skills, productive use of social media, among others, need to be included because the goal is not to build expansive business empires that can meet people's goods and services needs with admirable variety, but to inculcate 'people' skills that human operators of the system can apply in an atmosphere of cordiality.
Keywords: Business Curriculum, Soft Skills, Training and Education, Service Delivery

Introduction

Individuals, organizations and governments acknowledge the invaluable contributions of training to human capital development, which reflect in improved service delivery and turn-over. Yearly, organizations commit substantial parts of their appropriations to both training and re-training of staff. Cursory observation confirms that much of Business curriculum appears to focus on concepts, theories and procedures to the neglect of those fine-grain soft skills which help create a warm work-place atmosphere and enhance retention of quality clientele. Importantly, given that soft skills are said to be personality traits, it is necessary to begin to teach them very early in the Business project so that students can imbibe these before they become set in their pattern of behaviour and social responses.

To this end, it is necessary to strengthen and enrich the so-called general studies components of Business to provide a broad multi-disciplinary platform for the inculcation of these people skills. Companies and organizations are advised to encourage employees to adopt courteous behaviours in dealing with colleagues and outsiders. Such staff as are adjudged by both colleagues and customers to do it well should be noted for commendation. The goods and services market is spacious; but it is experiencing congestion. The 'business as usual' posture of big transnational organizations has changed.

Although these big businesses enjoy unlimited access to quick loans and long-term life-lines from funding agencies, they are beginning to wake up to the dogged competition from small enterprises which operate in the huge shadows of their towering businesses. On their own, consumers of goods and services now realize that they really do have room to choose between patronizing the big corporations where they are valued no more than just 'faceless' clients and the much smaller providers of same goods and services but where they experience that special touch which enhances their sense of humanness, where they are treated, not just as mere consumers of goods, but respected and dignified ones at that.

Research has shown that human beings exhibit a natural tendency to go to places where they are treated with respect and decency. According to Mittal and

Copyright © 2018 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

Kamakura (2001) and Mosahab, Mahamad and Ramayah (2010), consumers of goods sometimes choose to patronize a services outlet, not just for the quality of goods, but for the quality of treatment or handling of the customers. Unfortunately, existing business curricula hardly place desired emphasis on acquisition of the kind of skills required to win and retain clients in a very busy and competitive goods and services market. This paper, therefore, examines the place and contributions of soft skills in training and education for business and technological development.

This paper, using the literature method, examines the nature, types and potential contributions of soft skills to quality service delivery both in private and public enterprises. This paper as much as possible, advocates that rich contents in soft skills, especially good telephone habits for help-line staff, good email-writing skills, productive use of social media, among others, need to be included because the goal is not to build expansive business empires that can meet people's goods and services needs with admirable variety, but to inculcate 'people' skills that human operators of the system can apply in an atmosphere of cordiality.

Business and Soft Skills

Business skills include all the soft skills, social skills and technical skills needed to be successful in management and business fields. The soft skills include critical thinking, problem solving, communications, time management, public speaking, presenting, leadership, decision making and more. On the technical side, a business role requires some key analytics and mathematics skills as well as some computer skills and experience with widely used business software programs such as Microsoft Excel, Word and Power point. A good place to start is with soft skills, taking courses in communications, time management and leadership. Then advance into specialized technical skills as you determine your career path (Louw, Bosch & Venter, 2001; Baruch & Leeming, 2001; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Nixon & Helms, 2002; Blass, 2005; GMAC, 2005).

The new business models and organizational complexity require rapid action, flexibility, and new managerial skills to properly address unforeseen situations, changes, and critical events that constantly happen in a work environment. What makes a difference for business results is the quality of interpersonal relationships, the development of people's skills, the ability to work as a team, and the effectiveness of decision-making processes (Baruch & Leeming, 2001; Blass, 2005; Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Dainty, 2008).

Business Education: theory and concept

National Policy on Education (2004) in Nigeria articulates the philosophy and objectives of Business Education as:

- To provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business, particularly at craft, advanced craft and technical levels.
- Provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agriculture, commercial and economic development.
- Give training and impart the necessary skills to individuals who shall be self-reliant economically

Trainees completing technical college programmes shall have three options:

a. Secure employment either at the end of the whole course or after completing one or more modules of employable skill;
b. Set up their own business and become self-employed and be able to employ others.
c. Pursue education in advance craft/technical programme and in post-secondary (tertiary) technical institutions such as College of Education, Polytechnic, University

The bottom-line, here, is that Business Education is intended to prepare people for jobs in commerce and industry.

On the other hand, the National Standards for Business Education (1995) identifies the following as constituting what it calls "21st Century Skills':

- Digital age literacy-functional, visual, scientific, technological, information, cultural literacy and global awareness.
- Inventive thinking and sound reasoning
- Effective communication
- High productivity

But beyond these competences, a business curriculum ought to make ample provision for other key competences such as: strategic awareness, adaptability to new situations, relationship skills, among others.

Relationship skills need to be emphasized and given strategic recognition in the design, delivery and evaluation of business curricula, which is the focus of this paper.

About relationship skills

According to Locker (2000), companies have long been aware that treating customers well pays off in more sales and higher profits. Relationship skills have been variously referred to as soft skills, social skills, life skills, emotional literacy, etc. Though often associated with a person's emotional intelligence , soft or relationship skills are identified as a cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication skills, people skills, etc, that characterize relationship with

other people (Emiliani, 2006; Halfhill & Nielson, 2007; Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Dainty, 2008). We must, at this point, make a sharp distinction between these soft skills and their counterpart hard, 'doing' skills which take most of the attention of extant business curricula.

It is relatively easy to see and determine that a craftsman has molded a given number of blocks, or sewn a specified number of school uniforms, or has laid tiles in a given number of rooms in a building, just as it is easy to note that a supervisor has organized his work team into shift groups. These skills, and others in their genre, are easily provided for in a training programme. If the task is competency-based, the craftsman is adjudged to have acquired the said skill when he is able to perform the task to specification. Incidentally, in the case of relationship skills, there is hardly a training curriculum that has modules in courtesy, social graces and the like (Kathawal, Abdou & Elmuti, 2002; Isani & Virk, 2003; Iqbal, 2004; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; Khan, 2008).

To Weare (2003), it is the ability to understand ourselves and other people, and in particular to be aware of, understand, and use information about the emotional states of ourselves and others with competence. It includes the ability to understand, express and manage our own emotions, and respond to the emotions of others in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others.

UNICEF (2002) describes life skills as a set of human skills acquired through teaching or direct experience, that are used to handle problems and questions commonly experienced in daily living. They are behaviours used appropriately and responsibly in the management of personal affairs (UNICEF, 2002; Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Langbert, 2005; Niazi, 2006; Navarro, 2008). Meanwhile, WHO (1999) classifies life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of daily living.

According to Rifking (nd), quoting Portland Business Journal, this set of skills includes ability to:

i. Understand ourselves and moderate our responses;
ii. Talk effectively and empathize accurately
iii. Build relationships of trust, respect and productive interaction.

It is the ability to communicate effectively with people in a friendly way, especially in business (Dictionary.com).

Goodwill in business and how to build it

Lehman and DuFrene (2005), in explaining how honour, honesty and credibility build strong, lasting relationships and lead to long-term success of one's business, use a very powerful imagery to describe the irrevocable damage that cruel and unkind words can cause: an arrow, once it is shot, can not be recalled! They are strongly of the opinion that a business is worth more than its tangible assets; it needs a good name and reputation, desirable location, unique product and excellent customer service. Therefore, they counsel that insensitive messages, whether directed to customers, employees or business partners, can offend, alienate and deplete goodwill.

On the other hand, Lesikar and Flatley (2004) opine that in business, people like to be singled out for attention. To them, courtesy, as a major contribution to good will in business, means treating people with respect and friendly human concern. According to the authors,:

> …when you communicate with people outside the organization, a major concern is to gain or maintain favourable relationships. Email messages or letters written for a company to its customers are examples of such communications. The information in these messages will be important, of course. In fact, probably it will be the most important part. But you also will need to communicate certain effects-effects that tend to convey a favourable image of the company.
>
> One effect you will need to communicate is the goodwill effect. Building goodwill through written messages is good business practice. Wise business leaders know that the success of their business is affected by what people think about the business. They know that what people think about a business is influenced by their human contact with that business; the services they receive, how they are treated, the manners (etiquette) displayed, and such. The written word is a major form of human contact….

These skills-soft, life, social or whatever else skills they are called-do not come naturally; they are learned and imbibed. They have to be consciously and deliberately inculcated in people. This is the uncompromising view of Allen (2010):

> A man cannot acquire self-control, and become possessed of the wisdom and peace-giving knowledge which that self-control confers, but by many years of patient

> labour...good or true, actions are those that spring from a consideration for others, that arise in calm reason and harmonious thought framed on moral principles…he will learn not to speak or act in anger, or envy, resentment, but will study how to control his mind, and will restore it to calmness before acting…and he will avoid... those acts of trickery, deceit, double-dealing in order to gain some personal profit or advantage.

What Allen is pushing here is definitely more than paying mere lip service to curriculum entry that makes a notation on treating customers well.

According to Ojimadu (2012), customer service involves establishing a business relationship with clients with a view to 'retaining their loyalty to your brand.' He gives example of Nordstorm (reportedly, in business since 1901) which encourages its store attendants to 'maintain a smile while dealing with customers irrespective of any situation.' In order to ensure that this policy is ingrained in their staff, the organization has in-house secret shoppers who pretend to be customers to monitor and evaluate staff reaction. Sometimes, these in-house shoppers come in noisy and highly irritable to test the patience and practice of their store attendants. The whole idea is to ensure that good customer service is associated with company brand.

Let us consider these scenarios and imagine their net effect on company goodwill:

A. How a poorly written, insensitive message can produce serious negative reactions:

> Dear Mr Morley,
> Your December 3rd complaint was received, and contents noted. After reviewing the facts, I regret to report that I must refuse your claim. If you will read the warranty brochure, you will see that the shelving you bought is designed for loads-a maximum of 800 pounds. You should have bought the heavy-duty product.
> I regret the damage this mistake caused you and trust that you will see our position. Hoping to be of service to you in the future, I remain
> Sincerely yours,

In this message, according to Lesikar and Flatley (2004), the words are impolite. 'Instead of showing concern for the reader, they are blunt, tactless, and unfriendly. Overall, they leave a bad impression in the reader's mind- the impression of a writer, and a business, unconcerned about the needs for good human relations.'

B. I once called one of the public universities in Nigeria to make some enquiries. I resolved to know if I could do a programme in that school with lower years of experience required. To my surprise, the lady on the help-line desk who picked the call, I guess she was either in a depressed or angry mood, responded rudely "What are you talking about?" I immediately ended the call because I could not imagine someone attending to a customer talk like that. It shows that the university has no regard for the students who happens to be their customers. Why would an organization put someone who has no human relations skills in its help-line?

C. The other day, I was at the bus park to board a bus for a trip. Immediately I alighted from my car, I was accosted by two marketers of a transport company. They did a very good job in convincing me to get on their bus for my trip. After a little hesitation and consideration of their promise of good service delivery. I decided to consider them for a trial. To my surprise, after they have collected the fare, their tone changed towards me. Almost all the passengers in the vehicle needed to plead with them for the bus to take off for the trip. I ended up staying two and a half hours in the park. This I consider a failure! It is not enough to have a strong marketing strategy, without a strategy of keeping your customers happy and loyal. After the trip, I took note of the name of the transport company and vowed never to patronize them again.

Suggested curricular intervention

Research and practical experience have shown a strong and direct relationship between input and output in any process, whether it is in education or industry. The quality and quantity of an output is inseparable from the quality and quantity of input (Eshiotse, 2013). Research in education has also established that whatever characteristics, skills and

attitudes we desire to imbue in the products of an educational programme should be provided for in the curriculum.

Thus, according to Fish (2003), curriculum is the face of a profession's best educational thinking, whether it is planned interaction of pupils with instructional content, material, resources and processes for evaluating the attainment of educational objectives, or all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, and it is carried out in groups or individually, inside or outside the school (Kerr, 1999; Randlesome, 2000; Tay, 2001; Thomas, Sharkey & Beeman, 2008; Rahman & Zahid, 2009).

The closest provision for development and acquisition of social, soft, people or interpersonal skills in Business Administration in use in universities in Nigeria is for just one semester, and is coded Business Communication. The details include:

Theories, elements, principles, models, settings, functions of communication; oral, written, non-verbal communication; organizational, public and corporate communication; listening, writing, letter-writing; conduct, rules, procedure and aims of meetings; conference, seminars, debates and symposium; words and meaning, synonyms, antonyms, affixation; reports.

In the polytechnic sector, what is available is use of English and Communication in English, inclusive of topics such as: comprehension, essay-writing, literary appreciation, letter-writing, logic, parts of speech, sentence making, idiomatic expressions, etc. There is absolutely nothing in the content that prepares the student to help the prospective employer build goodwill. The cost of acquiring the required skills is shifted to the employer who must sponsor his staff for further training to learn to deal with both colleagues within and clients without.

A course of study known as Social Skills Acquisition (or any other title considered appropriate) needs to be developed, distinct from Business Communication. The duration can be one semester or more, so long as it gives students enough time to go through theoretical conceptual foundations and practical exposure in model or demonstration business offices set up for the purpose (Ments, 1999). The aspect of practicals should be supervised and evaluated for final grading.

In addressing these curricular issues, our key concerns, according to Tyler (1949), should be:

- What key educational purposed do we seek to attain? That is, what outcome do we want?
- What educational experiences are likely to attain these purposes? That is, what content is needed to get the outcome?
- How can these experiences be organized effectively? That is, how can content be best taught/learned?
- How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? That is, how do we evaluate the process of its teaching and learning?

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that existing Business curricula richly provide for knowledge and skills for creation and management of small businesses, professional maintenance of accounting records, efficient management of human and material resources, sourcing and accessing funds for business expansion on very friendly terms. To balance the curricular offerings:

Providers, operators, financiers of Business education and employers of the products need to sit down and identify soft skills considered to be germane to the dispensing of relationship skills so that they can be fully built into Business curriculum. As much as possible, rich contents in soft skills, especially good telephone habits for help-line staff, good email-writing skills, productive use of social media, among others, need to be included because the goal is not to build expansive business empires that can meet people's goods and services needs with admirable variety, but to inculcate 'people' skills that human operators of the system can apply in an atmosphere of cordiality.

Importantly, given that soft skills are said to be personality traits, it is necessary to begin to teach them very early in the Business project so that students can imbibe these before they become set in their pattern of behavior and social responses. To this end, it is necessary to strengthen and enrich the so-called general studies components of Business to provide a broad multi-disciplinary platform for the inculcation of these people skills.

Companies and organizations are advised to encourage employees to adopt courteous behaviours in dealing with colleagues and outsiders. Such staff as are adjudged by both colleagues and customers to do it well should be noted for commendation.

References

1. Baruch, Y. & Leeming, A. (2001). The added value of MBA studies – graduates perceptions. Personnel Review, 30(5), 586-601.
2. Blass, E. (2005). The rise and rise of the corporate university. Journal of European Industrial Training, 29(1), 58-74.

3. Buckley R. and Caple J. (2006) The theory and practice of training. London: Kogan page
4. Career Opportunities News (2002) Soft Skills Critical Thinking.http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/criticalthinking Retrieved 27/3/2015
5. Clinebell, K. S. & Clinebell, M. J. (2008). The Tension in Business Education Between Academic Rigor and Real-World Relevance: The Role of Executive Professors. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 7(1), 99-107.
6. Cummins J. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills.en.wikipedia.org Retrieved 27/3/2015
7. Dainty, P. (2008). Improving MBA Effectiveness: The Case for Embedding Personal Competences in the MBA curriculum. MBS, Working Paper.
8. Emiliani, M. L. (2006). Improving management education. Quality Assurance in Education, 14(4), 363-384.
9. Global Evaluation of Life Skills Education Programme Evaluation Report (2002) New York: UN Children's Fund
10. GMAC. (2005). Corporate Recruiters Survey, GMAC, Washington, DC.
11. Grubb W. N. and Ryan P. (1999) the role of evaluation in Vocational Education and Training. London: International Labour Office
12. Halfhill, T. R. & Nielson, T. M. (2007). Quantifying the "Softer Side" of Management: An Example Using Teamwork Competencies. Journal of Management Education, 31(1), 64.
13. Hatch D. (2006) Everyday Greatness-Inspiration for a meaningful life. Nashville: FranklynCovey Co.
14. Hay, A. & Hodgkinson, M. (2006). Exploring MBA career success. Career Development. International, 11(2), 108-124.
15. Iqbal, A. (2004). Problems And Prospects Of Higher Education In Pakistan. University of Arid, Agriculture, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.
16. Isani, U. A. G. & Virk, M. L. (2003). Higher Education in Pakistan: A historic and futuristic perspective. National book Foundation, Islamabad, Pakistan, 4(8), 169- 312.
17. Kathawal, Y., Abdou, K. & Elmuti, D.S. (2002). The global MBA; A comparative assessment for its future. Journal of European industrial training, 26(1), 14-23.
18. Khan, A. M. (2008). Quality of Various Aspects of Higher Education in Private Sector of Pakistan as Viewed by Administrator, Teacher and Students. Bulletin of Education and Research, 30(2), 7-27.
19. King G. (2004) Good Writing Skills. Glasgow: Harpercollins Publishers
20. Langbert, M. (2005). The master's degree in HRM: Midwife to a new profession? Academy of Management Learning & Education, 4(4), 434-450.
21. Louw, L., Bosch, J. K. & Venter, D. J. L. (2001). Graduates' perceptions of the quality of MBA programmes. Quality Assurance in Education, 9(1), 40-45.
22. Louw, L., Bosch, J. K. & Venter, D. J. L. (2001). Quality perceptions of MBA courses and required management competencies. Quality Assurance in Education, 9(2), 72-79.
23. Maslow A. (1954) Motivation and Personality. New York: Harper
24. Maxwell J. (2010) Everyone communicates. Few connect. Nashville: Thomas Nelson
25. Ments M. V. (1999) The effective use of Role-Play: Practical Techniques for Improving Learning. London: Kogan Page Limited
26. Mintzberg, H. & Gosling, J. (2002). Educating managers beyond borders. Academy of Management Learning & Education. 1(1), 64-76.
27. Mittal V. and Kamakura W. A. (2001) Satisfaction, Repurchase intent, and Repurchase Behaviour: Investigating the moderating Effect of Customer Characteristics, Journal of Marketing Research, 38(1), 131-142
28. Mosahab R. ,Mahamad O. and Ramayah T. (2010). Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: A Test of Mediation. International Business Research Vol. 3, No 4
29. Navarro, P. (2008). The MBA Core Curricula of Top-Ranked U.S. Business Schools: A Study in Failure? Academy of Management Learning & Education, 7(1), 108-123.
30. Niazi, H. K. (2006). The contribution of the Private Sector to Higher Education in Pakistan with Particular Reference to Efficiency and Equity. Post-Doctoral Study (unpublished) at Institute of Education, University of London, UK.
31. Nixon, J. C. & Helms, M. M. (2002). Corporate universities vs higher education institutions. Industrial and Commercial Training, 34(4), 144-50. People skills. Dictionary.com Retrieved 27/3/2015
32. Pfeffer, J. & Fong, C.T. (2002). The end of business schools? Less success than meets the eye. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 1(1), 78-95.
33. Rahman, A. & Zahid, M. M. (2009). MBA programs in Pakistan. Draft Paper.
34. Randlesome, C. (2000). Changes in management culture and competencies: the German experience. Journal of Management Development, 19(7), 629-642.
35. Rifking H. (nd) Invest in people to boost bottomline. en.wikipedia.org Retrieved 27/3/2015
36. Tay, A. (2001). Management's Perception of MBA Graduates in Malaysia. Journal of Management Development, 20(3), 258-274.
37. Thomas, W., Sharkey, & Beeman, D. R. (2008). On the edge of hypercompetition in higher

education: the case of the MBA. On the Horizon, 6(3), 143-1
38. Udom E. U. (1988) Adminisprudence: A behavioural approach to managing ourselves and others. Ibadan: Spectru Books Ltd
39. Weare K. (2003) Developing the emotionally literate school. London: David Fulton
40. WHO (1999) Partners in life skills training: Conclusions from a United Nations Inter-Agency Meeting. Geneva