

**THE INFLUENCE OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL CULTURAL SYSTEMS ON  
EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE IN CORPORATE ORGANIZATIONS IN  
KENYA**

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**Abstract**

*Studies on organizational culture relate unethical conduct in the workplace as stemming from greed, lack of clear codes of ethics, impact of peer influence, among others. While that school of thought might be convincing, the entire concept of the root cause of either ethical or unethical behaviour among employees in corporate organizations has not been fully explored. In any organization where human beings from diverse backgrounds meet to work, there is a high chance that each of their cultural systems, together with that of their organization, determines their attitude and output within the work environment. Hence, it can be argued that employee ethical behaviour and performance are to a greater extent guided by some cultural systems. In that regard, this paper examines the extent to which formal and informal cultural systems such as adhocracy culture, clan culture, hierarchical culture, and market culture influence employees' performance in corporate organizations in Kenya. It further explores African ethics and shows how a loss in ethical leadership could also culminate into negative culture that ruins performance of employees in organizations. As a way forward, the paper argues that the adoption of African collective values of Ubuntu such as compassion, survival, group solidarity, respect and dignity could help in cultural management in corporate organizations and hence enhance employee ethical conduct, positive energy and productivity. This paper is based on a desktop literature review of an ongoing research that is qualitative in nature and will use one higher learning institution in Langata Ward, Nairobi County for a case study.*

**Keywords:** Formal and informal cultural systems, corporate organization, African ethics, Ubuntu, ethical leadership

## **Introduction**

Culture is defined as “the holistic combination of learned and shared beliefs, values, and practices that create cohesion in a group and is the core concept within which anthropologists work. It is also dynamic; evolving based on the needs of the people within it and as one culture comes into contact with another” (Henson, 2021). Culture, as a way of life, generally controls every aspect of human behaviour. It is visible in social, economic and political spheres of lives. In the context of corporate organizations, culture steers the direction in which the daily undertakings of an organization proceed (Little, 2016). The result of the interface between formal or informal cultural systems and daily activities of an organization has given rise to what is in contemporary society generally referred to as corporate or organizational culture.

Culture is the foundation upon which organizations and institutions are built. The movers of culture in a corporate organization include constitutions, policies, procedures, terms of service, statutes, guidelines and strategies (Alvesson, 2002, p. 51). The author further states that culture also helps establish normative order in institutions by establishing standards in which its members operate in society. It also establishes certain rituals associated with the behaviour of its members; that is, a pattern of character or doing things associated with each group. Culture creates specific rites of passage and portrays key events in the communal life by creating an identity among its members and enables them to communicate and interact in a way they all understand and identify with (Wong, 2021).

However, there is a missing component in the culture of corporate organizations that is an African identity, which could help resolve the challenges that are evident in other common cultures in corporate organizations in Africa. If incorporated, African ethics can act as a guideline that seeks to bring together organizational cultural systems and personal cultures by employees to enhance employee performance and ultimately the overall organization's performance. This paper seeks to identify the relationship between formal and informal cultural systems in corporate organizations and employee performance and, specifically, how African ethics can be explicitly recognized and incorporated within the cultural systems.

According to Kandula (2006), the key to good employee performance is a strong cultural system in an organization. Employee performance is “The degree of an achievement to which employees fulfil the organizational mission” (Awadh & Saad, 2013). Cultural systems in an organization may stem from different sources. The main source is mostly the founders' beliefs, as well as learning experience of group members and new beliefs and assumptions of new members (Benter & Datche, 2016).

The impact of corporate cultural systems on performance occurs when founders impose their personal experiences and culture on their employees and partners within the organization. This can affect employee's performance, both positively and negatively (Tedla, 2016). Unger et al. (2014) found the existence of a positive relationship between cultural systems and employee performance. In another empirical study, Flamholtz and Randle (2012) found 46% of corporate earnings are affected by cultural system effectiveness. However, Berg and Wilderom (2012) argued that cultural systems might affect employee performance, where the change is a longer time interval. For instance, Meyer (2019) states that in the Apple Inc Company, Steve Job imposed his assumptions and personal culture on his employees, creating a strong and a successful cultural system. However, imposing one's beliefs on employees creates conflict and a toxic work environment. Cultural system is dynamic and varies from organization to organization, depending on the industry and location. A strong positive culture can make employees perform brilliantly and achieve great success. On the other hand, a negative culture can breed unethical conduct, hence affecting employee and organizational performance (SHRM, 2017).

### **Formal and Informal Cultural Systems and Employee Performance**

Corporate or organizational culture often determines how employees carry out their duties. According to Businessballs (2022), cultural systems bind the workforce together and provide direction for the company. Cultural systems can have varying influence on employee performance and motivation levels. For instance, studies have shown that employees work harder to achieve organizational goals if they consider themselves as part of the cooperate environment. This is particularly viable in corporate organizations that practice informal cultural systems where employees have the freedom to be creative and have control of their own tasks, hence increasing productivity (Okore, 2020).

Identifying a cultural system enables an organization to reach its desired efficiency, depending on the mission and vision of the organization. Scholars have demonstrated that there are different types of cultural systems and they each play a role in employee performance (Akpa, Olalekan, & Nneji, 2021, p. 3). They can be classified into formal and informal cultural systems. A Formal cultural system is characterized by written policies, operating procedures and the management structure. It also includes the mission statement and values of an organization and the foundation on which the organization is built. It is purposely planned. The formal cultural system is deliberately impersonal and does not take into consideration the sentiments of organizational members (SHRM, 2017).

The most common types of formal cultural systems include: hierarchical culture whose primary focus is structure and stability. Organizations with such a culture adhere to the set organizational structure (Gaille, 2018). There is a clear chain of command and multiple management tiers that separate employees and leadership. Due to the clear direction and well-defined processes, employees tend to perform well (Schein, 2004). On the other hand, hierarchical culture could have adverse effects on employee performance. Due to its rigidity, the hierarchical culture leaves very little or no room for creativity. It also loses touch of the social aspect of the work place as the organization takes precedence over the individual which can be detrimental to employee performance, because employees perform better when they feel like they belong to a group or a family. This culture can sometimes give life to an “us-versus-them” mentality. In this, the more junior employees feel disconnected from the more senior employees (Khaire & Amabile, 2008).

Another type of a formal cultural system is the market culture whose main focus is competition and growth. Market culture puts precedence on profits and bottom line and is characterized by the separation of roles between the employees and the leadership of the organization (Şahin & Güngör, 2018). This can lead to unhealthy competition among employees, which in turn can kill the team-work spirit. It can further contribute to employee burn-out from all the high expectations and constant demands for profits which will lead to lower performance (Businessballs, 2022).

On the other hand, an informal cultural system refers to the relationship between people in the organization based on personal attitudes, emotions, prejudices, likes, dislikes etc. The informal cultural system consists of the personal relationships and means of communication that are often necessary to accomplishing the work of the organization but are not a part of the formal organization structure (Nandini, 2021). The informal cultural system is characterized by “personal relationships, communities of shared interest, and social networks that arise as employees associate with one another in a workplace setting. How employees think, behave, and interact with one another in an informal cultural system is based on those personal relationships” (Heinz, 2022). Examples of informal cultural systems include: adhocracy culture which is flexible and not limited by bureaucratic procedures and policies. Lacatus (2013) states that this type of informal cultural system focuses more on innovation and improvements. It has an extremely fast environment and the status quo, though it may be working, could be challenged. Adhocracy culture affects employee performance in that decisions are made very fast according to the immediate needs and there is a lot of flexibility. “It gives employees a sense of pride which in turn affects employee performance positively. This leads to a very strong group identity” (Harrapa, 2021). It can, however, lead to ineffective communication due to its being low on hierarchy which could ultimately affect

performance negatively (Lacatus, 2013). Another form of informal cultural system is the clan culture.

The clan culture is people-focused and the work environment always feels family-like. It is highly collaborative and every employee feels valued and communication is top priority. It is characterized by high rates of employee engagement and has an adaptable environment (Şahin & Güngör, 2018). Clan culture encourages social interaction and collaboration which positively affects employee performance. This is because the clan organizational culture refers to “a large family-like organization based on the mutual support of its tightly connected members, who work like a team” (Şahin & Güngör, 2018). The main assets of such an organization are commitment built through mentorship and consequently personal growth and friendly workplace (Lacatus, 2013).

However, Krackhardt & Hanson (1993) state that because of its exclusivity, the informal cultural system can lead to a very closed-off environment where employees are unwilling to work with people outside their own network. Informal cultural system evolves over time and is a network of relationships that exist within an organization. The relationships arise due to common interests or friendships among employees. These relationships can be across divisions and it is where daily interactions between members of staff take place. This informal cultural system may be different from that which is set out on paper. Nandini (2021) states that informal cultural systems develop when: employees come up with new ways of working which not only save their time but are easier for them. The Informal cultural system further develops when interactions among employees in the work place are shaped by friendship groupings and other relationships. The author further states that informal cultural system could be formed when employees forget what the formal structures in the corporate organization are, since it is easier to work in an informal setting.

Informal cultural systems could also stem from employees having different goals from those of the corporate organization. When the employees have similar goals, they tend to gravitate together. Informal cultural systems could also emanate from employees that are natural leaders and hence tend to lead a group, even though they do not have official managerial positions in the corporate organization. Nandini (2021) states that the management of cultural systems can make use of the advantages that informal cultural systems present in corporate organizations. However, in order to do this, the management should first recognize the advantages of informal cultural systems. The advantages include: higher levels of motivation are realized if the management works with the informal groups within various departments which increases employee performance. Also, informal networks in a corporate setting are better through informal networks. This

is because in informal networks, there is much more freedom of expression and relaxed bureaucracy in terms of channelling communication. This leads to increased innovation and motivation of the employees which ultimately helps the corporate organization to succeed. Informal cultural system further gives employees a sense of satisfaction and stability, hence increasing productivity and job performance (Nandini, 2021).

However, if not well managed, informal cultural systems could have adverse effects on employee performance in organizations. Previous studies have demonstrated that the disadvantages of informal cultural systems include: there could be misinterpretation of communication that takes place within an informal culture. This is due to the lack of structures that control the channelling communication which happens in a formal setting (Mooney, 2021). Further, there could be resistance to change by the employees in informal cultural systems, due to the fact that there could be possible conflict between the formal and informal cultural systems in the organization. This resistance could affect employee performance which leads to the corporate organization inefficiently meeting their objectives. Another disadvantage, according to Nandini (2021), is that the informal cultural system could potentially exert strong pressures for conformity.

Despite the cited advantages of both formal and informal cultural systems, they can both be difficult to implement due to the fact that the implementers of the set cultures are employees. It can be argued that due to the fact that employees come into organizations with different cultural orientations that stem from different upbringing and social orientation, it could be difficult integrate cultural systems and employee's personal cultural beliefs in order to enhance performance.

Negative cultural systems such as lack of trust among employees or between employees and management can easily lead to lower productivity, hence affecting performance (Tedla, 2016, p. 37). Corporate leaders could take measures and integrate the formal and informal cultures in order to optimize employee performance. Tedla (2016) proposes the following measures: first, there could be adaption of the informal structure to complement the formal one. Secondly, maintaining a looser formal cultural system so that the informal structure can thrive and the organizational management could recognize the informal cultural system in decision making. As demonstrated, both formal and informal cultures have positive and adverse influences on employee performance in organizations. The culture adopted within an organization determines how well employees will perform (Tedla, 2016).

### **Higher Learning Institutions and Formal and Informal Cultural Systems**

According to Coman & Bonciu (2016), higher learning institutions are similar to corporate organizations in many ways. They have structures and processes, missions, goals and strategies to reach those goals, and as in the case of business organizations, higher learning institutions are influenced by powerful, external forces such as demographic, economic and political conditions; yet, they are also shaped by strong forces of individual cultural orientation of employees that emanate from within.

This internal dynamic has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its force from its values, processes and goals (Hatch & Schultz, 2022). “A higher learning institution’s culture is reflected in what is done by members of the organization, how it is done and who is involved in doing it” (Coman & Bonciu, 2016). They further state that, “It concerns decisions, actions and communication, both on an instrumental and a symbolic level and involves stories, special language, norms, institutional ideology and attitudes that emerge from individual and organizational behavior” (Coman & Bonciu, 2016). Previous studies have demonstrated that in most higher learning institutions, the most dominant cultural system is hierarchical cultural system. For instance, (Şahin & Güngör, 2018) state that although every higher learning institution has its own cultural systems, the most dominant cultural system is the hierarchical culture, followed by market culture which fall under the category of formal cultural systems. Although it works based on its advantages, this type of culture lacks the social aspect and consideration of employees in organizations. This leads to demotivation of employees and lack of innovation as it hinders creativity, hence lowering productivity or performance among employees (Businessballs, 2022). In order to optimize performance, employees must have a sense of belonging and connectivity within a corporate setting. It can be argued that if the leadership of higher learning institutions creates a cultural system whereby the efforts and contributions of employees to the university community are appreciated, then employee performance is eminent. This can be realized by blending both the formal and informal cultural systems in higher learning institutions.

If the management insists on maintaining one form of formal cultural system, then, there could be the risk of breeding unethical behaviour. For instance, Katundano (2021) states that within a higher learning institution, the employees could develop a habit of not performing their duties as expected, which is largely as a result of the senior leadership being rigid and valuing the interest of the organization more than that of the employees. A strong positive culture leads to happier employees which makes them more productive. This is because strong and weak organizational cultures point that productivity boost is

likely due to employee motivation which increases significantly in companies where employees' basic needs are met through a strong culture (Wong, 2021).

It can further be argued that the emphasis on the practice of hierarchical culture solely in higher learning institutions brings about challenges. As discussed, the hierarchical culture detaches the employee needs in the organization which lowers employee performance. The most lacking issue in hierarchical culture is the lack of collaboration outside particular groups in the organization which hinders creativity and could lead to dormancy, both on employee personal development and performance, ultimately affecting the organization's performance (Gaille, 2018). The advantages and disadvantages of a hierarchical organizational structure involve communication, innovation and collaboration. "There must be strategies in place to deal with the potential negatives which like to occur under this structure. If no effort is made to deal with the negativity, then an organization becomes more likely to fail because its people are stuck into their specific roles, afraid of what may happen if they try to move forward" (Gaille, 2018).

The author further argues that the hierarchical cultural system has a top-down approach where those at bottom are given very little respect, while those at the top are given too much respect which creates a culture of unequal respect. This leads to employees becoming less motivated and could be less respectful. He further states that such culture of unequal treatment could lead to the leadership team being awarded perks that they may not have earned at the expense of the high-skill employee, which is unethical. Employees could either give the bare minimum, in terms of performance, or even quit employment which could lead to high turnover in the organization (Gaille, 2018).

It is, therefore, paramount for organizational leaders in higher learning institutions to deliberately come up with ways of the conveyance of the formal and informal cultures in order to harness the strengths of both cultures. In this case, the informal culture could be strengthened to complement the formal culture. This study proposes the consideration of African ethics as a link between the formal and the informal culture. Considering the importance of culture, particularly at individual level where it gives the sense of identity, organizations in Africa with employees from the African continent should recognize the importance of cultural identity to individuals. The employees should be allowed to be guided by their positive cultural identities to guide their daily routines. This is because as demonstrated in the study, the other common formula of organizational cultures, like in higher learning institutions, is a system and not people-oriented. This affects performance which necessitates the incorporation of African ethics in the corporate cultural systems. As a strategy, Ubuntu could be entrenched in the core values of higher learning institutions and has to be deliberately entrenched by organizational leaders.



### **African Ethics *Ubuntu* and Formal and Informal Cultural Systems**

Building a strong positive cultural system in an organization is an intentional act. A positive work culture “is one that prioritizes the well-being of employees, offers support at all levels within the organization, and has policies in place that encourage respect, trust, empathy, and support” (Andreev, 2022). It is characterized by: “Treating colleagues as friends, caring for them, and being interested in their wellbeing, supporting colleagues and offering compassion and kindness in times of need, forgiving mistakes and not assigning blame, working to inspire each other, finding and emphasizing meaningful aspects of the work and Prioritizing trust, respect, gratitude, and integrity” (Andreev, 2022).

Due to the unprecedented change and rapid technological advancements, employees entering the workforce come in with misleading assumptions such as the fact that millennials are distinctly different from other generations (Molefe, 2018). People are naturally different; therefore, they have different theories, opinions and experiences, which make us think differently about the business success and what the strategic drivers are, or should be used at different points.

It should, however, be recognized that building a strong positive culture takes a long time and can possibly take years to build. According to Wong (2021), the most effective way to develop a positive culture is by assessing how employees in the organization currently feel about the culture in place. As a way forward, this study recommends the adoption of African ethics, which is exemplified in *Ubuntu*, in the creation of positive cultural systems which would lead to better employee performance. *Ubuntu* in literal translation is “I am because you are which is a part of the Zulu phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which literally means that a person is a person through other people” (Ifejika, 2006). *Ubuntu* advocates for collective values such as communality, respect, dignity, acceptance, sharing, co- responsibility, humaneness, social justice, fairness, compassion, joy, love, fulfilment, among others (Heinz, 2022). Ifejika (2006) states that *Ubuntu* has its roots in humanist African philosophy, where the idea of community is one of the building blocks of society. *Ubuntu* does not only give strength to employees in an organization, but it is also very important for survival in general. It can be incredibly difficult for people in organizations to work together, no matter how competent and intelligent they are. This could be due to cultural differences and the difficulty in adapting the existing organizational culture. This makes the *Ubuntu* philosophy very important in corporate organizations, especially in Africa.

*Ubuntu* philosophy can enhance inclusivity in organizations. This incorporating its basic tenets in building cultural systems can bring more efficiency and productivity to the

workplace because it allows the workload to be shared, and as a result, reduces the pressure on individuals and ensures tasks are completed within a set time frame. Mangaliso, Mangaliso, Knipes & Jean-Denis (2018) state that previous studies have shown that the African worldview of Ubuntu which emphasizes on compassion and community among actors in corporate settings benefits the organizations that incorporate its principles and practices. They further state that “Ubuntu has been discussed in a wide variety of social science disciplines, including human resource management, leadership, psychology, philosophy, theology and business ethics” (Mangaliso, Mangaliso, Knipes, & Jean-Denis, 2018).

Ubuntu values place importance on the dignity of the human person, irrespective of race, gender, or creed. Furthermore, the practice of Ubuntu in an organization provides great learning opportunities by encouraging diversity where people gain insight from different perspectives and learn new concepts from more experienced colleagues (Mangaliso, Mangaliso, Knipes, & Jean-Denis, 2018). These authors further assert that *Ubuntu* also encourages collaboration and teamwork. Mutual support, shared goals, cooperation and encouragement are so necessary in the work place. With such a culture, employees are able to feel a greater sense of accomplishment when they are collectively responsible for the organization's outcomes.

On the contrary, if cutthroat competition is encouraged in the organization, it can easily kill the spirit of oneness. From the foregoing, compassion, care, survival, group solidarity, respect and dignity are all definitive of Ubuntu. They are key values that are required in cultural management in corporate organizations to enhance employee performance. As a way forward, leaders can enhance their effectiveness and increase employee productivity in African corporate organizations by setting ethical values of the Ubuntu philosophy as a framework for developing and transmitting their culture. The consequence would be an ethical culture that emphasizes both the desire and practice to be moral, from the leader down to the employees.

## **Conclusion**

As demonstrated, both formal and informal cultural systems have positive and adverse influences on employee performance in organizations; that the culture adopted within an organization determines how well employees will perform and ultimately the organization's performance. This necessitates the need to integrate performance and culture in order to optimize performance in institutions. The findings of this study showed that the cultural systems adopted in an organization are associated with how well employees perform. It has further provided evidence from previous studies that have

suggested that formal and informal cultural systems have implications on employee performance and ethical conduct within an organization. This paper has also highlighted the importance of harmonizing the formal and informal cultural systems in order to balance the shortcomings of each. To do this, the study proposed using the African ethics (Ubuntu philosophy) principles as a link to addressing the challenges experienced on both the formal and informal cultural systems.

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