

Nigerian Young Professionals and the Challenges of Future Leadership

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By

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1.0 Introduction

That the youth of today becomes the leaders of tomorrow is not doubt, and whether we are prepared or not, the natural law of succession is imminent. In this digital age of awareness and globalisation, industry leaders are taking proactive steps by carefully developing their Young Professionals (YPs) to meet with the challenges of eventual slow death of their professions and trade.

In response to this global trend, the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC) identified the need and initiated the process of forming its own brand of Young Professionals Forum (YPF) at the FIDIC Conference 2000 in Hawaii, USA. FIDIC-YPF including the famous Young Professionals Management Training Programme (YPMTP) became operational in 2004 at Copenhagen conference. Thereafter many among the member associations of FIDIC inaugurated their YPF in their respective countries.

On Thursday 10th of June 2010, the Association of Consulting Engineers Nigeria (ACEN) inaugurated its YPF in Lagos with the aim of promoting best practice of Consulting Engineering among the Nigerian Young professionals. The forum also aims to promote networking and further equip the Young Professionals to cope with the challenges of future industry leadership.

1.1 Objectives of ACEN-YPF

The objectives of ACEN- YPF were targeted to provide the following opportunities for the Young Professionals:

- Continuing Professional Development through technical and business skills training.
- Full and long term participation in ACEN and FIDIC activities, especially during the FIDIC annual conferences.
- Networking among Engineers in the industry.
- Participating in exchange programmes among other Young Professional Communities

- Mentoring Schemes.
- Access to a wide variety of online resources throughout the Engineering Industry worldwide.

Achieving the above objectives in particular and the overall challenge of YP development in general requires courage, personal commitment and sacrifices which sometimes are often misunderstood by ill-informed Young Professionals. The result of lack of adequate information and proper guidance, could lead to eventual loss of the aspiring professional to other less challenging and important roles in society.

This paper presents issues associated with YP self-development stages, Talent Management, the action or inaction of the top management and the challenges which are necessary companions along the life of our future leaders. The paper is structured into the following chapters:

- Introduction
- Ladder steps to professionalism
- Technical and business skills development
- Future leadership development
- Young Professionals(YPs) and the challenges of future leadership
- Conclusion

2.0 Ladder steps to professionalism

A Nigerian Young Professional (YP) in our industry is usually faced with challenges which can be logically viewed as steps to attainment of full professional status and expertise.

These critical steps are usually initiated from student and internship periods, through pupillage, registration for membership of professional bodies and continuing education. After the attainment of full professional status, other factors such as the societal influences and expectations, personal dreams and aspirations could have a direct impact on the perceived level of job satisfaction and future career development of the Young Professional. Sections 2.1-2.4 of this paper, presents a brief discussion on the impact of these steps on the life of our young professional colleagues.

2.1 Studentship to job market

The nature of engineering programmes and the life of its students could signal what lies ahead, one significant insufficient commodity is time, and as part of future preparations students are often required to solve complex scientific equations and abstract problems.

The first point of contact between students and practicing professionals is the internship programme in form of industrial training. Aspiring Young Professionals are often sent to industry with a view to learn and possibly participate in live engineering projects. If one is lucky to serve under an experienced and willing professional, the acquired experience during internship could form the foundation for future interest and the desire for innovation in the minds of future engineers.

To some, the foundation from internship could serve as the platform to build upon during the mandatory one year of national youth service. Unfortunately, majority of engineering corps members end in class rooms or idling in non-functional organisations and MDAs rather than the field.

During and after the National Youth Service, a YP is faced with the reality of searching for non-existing jobs. In some cases the waiting could take years resulting to disconnect from the acquired theoretical knowledge, with little or no practical experience. Hundreds of Nigerian youths are in this category.

2.2 Pupillage

After the national youth service only very few candidates could be recruited to commence the pupillage period. Sometimes it depends on individual career aspirations but the reality on ground is the restriction on choice of the available job. Therefore speciality or expertise could depend largely on this limitation.

During pupillage, a YP is expected to work, train and learn under an experienced professional. The challenges associated with this critical period include but not limited to lack of clear policy or strategic direction on the part of management and willing senior colleagues which often affects the quality of emerging Young Professionals under such firms.

It is quite tempting at this point for some YPs to derail in search of monetary gains as against the long term benefit of job satisfaction achieved through hard work, integrity and professional competence.

2.3 Professional registrations

To be eligible to practice engineering, it is mandatory for candidates to register with the regulatory bodies and membership of professional bodies which provides a platform to interact with colleagues. The Council for Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN) is the body with statutory right to register engineers.

The Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE) is the main professional body under which various discipline related divisions also attract different grades of memberships. Currently the Association of Consulting Engineers deals with firm membership.

Eligibility for registration with these bodies requires a minimum of four (4) years of postgraduate work experience.

Possibly due to hasty desire to assume the status of the name “Registered Engineer”, a lot of YPs try to get their way around the process and this has often led to undesirable consequences in transition from pupillage to registered professional status.

2.4 Dreams and Aspirations

After the necessary professional registrations and memberships YPs usually look forward to the future with confidence because of the excitements associated with the new status.

Few YPs often realise the enormity of the responsibilities accompanying the Registered Engineer status. Expectations from official responsibilities and schedules, professional colleagues, family and friends and the wider society are usually high. It is therefore important for the YP to learn how to balance and adjust to these competing demands.

To maintain relevance in this ever dynamic and competitive industry, YPs are required to direct their personal strategic plans towards acquiring new knowledge and skills.

3.0 Technical and business skills development.

In his book *Managing the Professional Services Firm*, Maister (2003) distinguishes knowledge from skill. While knowledge is relatively easy to accumulate quickly it also depreciates quickly, on the other hand, skills are hard to acquire but stays a little longer. A YP should consider himself on a continuous journey of learning and new skills acquisition.

It has been widely acknowledged that, the greatest assets of Professionals Services Firms (PSFs) are the people who drive the machinery of the firms operation. Therefore, a logical expectation from any serious consultancy firm is to incorporate in their strategy, a formidable plan for developing both the technical and business skills of its YPs.

3.1 Talent Management

If people are the greatest assets of PSFs then attracting retaining and developing outstanding talents should be a priority to any serious management committee. The art of Talent Management includes the best practice in recruiting, training, mentoring, management of diversity and performance evaluation.

In her book *The Art of Managing Professional Services*, Broderick (2011) summarises and presented the findings of a research team on characteristics shared by organisations promoting Talent Management into what she termed the “*Seven Essentials of Talent Management*”.

- ***Adopt a stewardship mindset***

A stewardship mindset is a belief shared by a firm or the organisation that it has a responsibility to develop its people. An environment where employees are respected and nurtured is an important feature of a successful PSF.

It should be a matter of priority to the senior management to evaluate the possible impacts of its decision on the people more especially the YPs.

- ***Recruit the right people from the start***

An important task to the management is to spend quality time in analysing, profiling and recruiting prospective employees who are technically and culturally the best fit into the organisation.

The process of taking in the right people should also include the elimination of the wrong ones.

- ***Carefully plan and manage careers***

A career plan matched by appropriate evaluation criteria should consider the progress of Young Professionals towards the seniority ladder.

This process can be achieved through formal performance evaluation and informally through continuous feedback and guidance from partners and mentors.

- ***Invest in training***

Training and equipping the YPs in a PSF is tantamount to upgrading the capacity of an organisation with consequent development of its competitive edge.

Outstanding PSFs invest in time and resources to providing continuous learning opportunities to both the senior professionals and the YPs.

- ***Devote professional time and resources***

Talent Management activities in serious minded PSFs derive participation from new intakes to Young Professionals and even the senior professionals.

It is usually regarded as an honour to be invited to lead the process either in recruitment, or training programmes within the firm.

- ***Commit to diversity***

A diversified workforce is an indication of good multicultural management, and also a degree of tolerance and foresight from the management to attract the best irrespective of individual backgrounds.

A PSF can apply this concept in avoiding any form of negative trend in either discrimination or undue favouritism among employees which could lead to failure of leadership and eventual collapse of the firm.

- ***Make talent management an accountable responsibility***

In well managed PSFs participation in talent management activities is being encouraged, monitored and reported.

Both professionals and staff should be accountable to this critical responsibility due to its relevance in building a generation of groomed future leaders of the industry.

3.2 Building SMART teams

The concept of team work considered the whole being greater than its component parts. It is pretty obvious that the business of PSFs require continuous selection of technologically responsive Young Professionals to bring about the needed innovation.

It is logical to expect the best from the product of talent management, more especially where an enabling environment is provided to create necessary synergies towards further talent development and capacities to confront the challenges of the business environment.

3.3 Customer service delivery

As the name goes, the Professional Services Firms (PSFs) offer professional services to clients or customers and it is noteworthy that no matter the level of expertise or capacities by a PSF, a client is critical to achieving the business objectives of the organisation.

Service delivery to clients requires a combination of business and technical skills, it is therefore paramount to plan and develop a method of attracting, retaining and winning new clients through adequate training and exposure to handle clients and their customer satisfaction demands.

4.0 Future leadership development

In all spears of human endeavour a visionary and purposeful leadership plays a pivotal role in changing the society. As core professionals, leaders of PSFs need even more leadership training and preparation to take their rightful positions in national economic development. ***“Future leadership development”*** is the motto of ACEN Young Professionals Forum (ACEN-YPF).

Interestingly, the behaviour, action or inaction of today’s leaders may translate to a significant impact on the quality of leadership expected from the future leaders. Therefore the evolution of future leaders could largely be a direct product of the strategy and leadership provided by the today’s firm management on the one hand, and the willingness of the YPs on the other.

Based on the research findings presented by Broderick referenced earlier, this chapter shall examine the essential characteristics of successful leaders and that of firms.

4.1 Essential characteristics of successful leaders

Five out of the six success characteristics presented in this paper could be the derivatives of emotional intelligence and peoples skills. These skills can be considered as soft skills in navigating the interpersonal dynamics of a partnership enterprise. The last one concerns understanding the business aspects.

- Good influencer/Builder of Coalitions
- Inspirational and Passionate
- Visionary
- Good Listener
- Good Communicator
- Understands the Business

4.2 Common Characteristics of Successful Firms

Broderick and her research team identified characteristics common to world's outstanding PSFs, interestingly these shared values offer clues to what works and what doesn't in a knowledge focused business. Even though, some of the identified traits are common to other successful businesses some are unique to PSF. Generally, these common traits which are listed below, provide a useful guidance for any serious organisation wishing to move across the frontiers of mediocrity to the excellence of the next generation PSF.

- Firm values and culture are inviolate
- Everything revolves around the client
- They respect and invest in their people
- They operate in fluid, flexible teams
- Organisational structures are extremely simple
- The senior team owns the business
- Everyone serves
- They stick to their knitting
- It is about the work more than the money

5.0 Young Professionals(YPs) and the challenges of leadership

Some important factors in organisations are people, objectives, structure and management. *People* come together to achieve *objectives* and a *structure* is needed to coordinate and channel peoples interactions and efforts. In order to direct and control the activities and efforts of its members towards the pursuits of stated objectives, *management* is paramount.

Developing successive leaders in an organisation should be accorded the priority it deserves, because, it concerns the life and death issue of the firm survival. This could be the reason why a firm managed by greedy and visionless leaders collapse to death after the departure of the founders.

The passage of baton to emerging leaders is a logical conclusion obeying the natural law of succession. The future bearers of this baton should therefore accept the inevitability of the challenges associated with such enormous responsibilities. Maxwell (2005), whose description of the *leaders in the middle* closely represents the situation of Nigerian Young Professionals, has identified some of these challenges in his book *The 360° Leader*.

5.1 The Tension Challenge

At certain stage of the career of a Young Professional, tension challenge is inevitable. The dilemma of initiating innovative ideas depends on the level of authority a YP possesses. Where the top management of the firm are out of touch with the latest industry direction and thinking, any attempt to innovate could mean challenging the authority of the management.

To squarely face this challenge a YP should think critically and evaluate his options and act in the best interest of the firm without overstepping his bounds. On the other hand, a firm which harbours tension among its ranks stands the chance of losing exceptional YPs.

5.2 The Frustration Challenge

The frustration challenge usually emanates from following an ineffective leader. Among leaders who are frustrating and nobody wants to follow are the Visionless Leaders, Insecure Leaders, Selfish Leaders and Chameleon leaders among others.

Leaders who lack vision usually fail to provide direction and a measure of passion to carry others along. Insecure Leaders require every decision to be put through their filter of self-centeredness and these crops of leaders think everything is about them.

What is more frustrating than following a chameleon leader whose unpredictability results in valuable time wasting for younger colleagues in trying to understand his next move. A Selfish Leader leads for his gain at the detriment of others. These types of leaders, view the game of life in terms of winners and losers, and they often times wish others to loose for them to shine.

To survive the frustration challenge a YP should try and add value to the organisation by appreciating the strengths and persevere the weaknesses of his leader thereby developing solid relationship with his leader as long as the leader remained ethical.

5.3 The Multi-Hat Challenge

People at the top management always bear the weight of success or failure of the organisation, but they have the luxury of choosing what to focus on. In fact, leaders at the top are expected to delegate other things and focus on few things with great excellence.

While YPs at the bottom of the organisation are usually assigned limited task, those YPs at the middle are expected to perform tasks and should have knowledge beyond their experience. The Multi-Hat wearing YPs at the middle are constantly expected to respond to shifting and demanding priorities within limited time and resources.

To handle this challenge a YP is expected to understand when to change hats to fit the priority demand and remember to remain flexible and not change personality when a new Hat is in place.

5.4 The Ego Challenge

The desire for recognition is human. However, the contribution of the YPs at the middle is often hidden. A YP in such situation often displays a certain level of impatience for recognition, which is usually a product of Ego Challenge. It is ironic to realise that enduring recognition of worth emerges out of years of respect and trust earned over a period of time. Successful leaders take pride in serving others while ignoring the temptation of gratitude or even immediate recognition.

To handle the Ego Challenge it is important for a YP to appreciate the value of his position and to concentrate on assigned duties rather than dreams. Being a good team player prepares one for future team leadership.

5.5 The Vision Challenge

Fulfilling the vision of an organisation is a major challenge to the top management of an organisation. Fortunately it is a responsibility shared across the spectrum of a firm leadership. There is a greater tendency for YPs in an organisation to respond to this challenge differently.

It is common for a people to antagonise a vision they either don't understand or are not its originators. Others may not openly attack a vision but could ignore it through lack of support and personal commitments. For those who found it difficult to accept a company's vision on ground of principles, it is sometimes honourable to leave the organisation with dignity.

In order to handle this challenge, the best approach for emerging leaders is to adapt and align themselves to the vision and mission of the organisation. On the other hand a good management leadership is expected to engage his subjects through dialogue and wise counselling.

5.6 The Influence Challenge

The influence challenge affects virtually everyone in the organisation. Generally good leaders see beyond the ordinary and in trying to accomplish a vision they expect people to follow them to its realisation. Ironically it is not all leaders that people want to follow, to enjoy followership you need to have either position or influence.

A solution to influence challenge is to be a leader that other people want to follow. According to Maxwell referenced earlier, to be followed people need to know, trust, respect and admire you. In addition, people like following a leader they can easily approach.

Your level of influence could be directly linked to the depth of personal concern you exhibit towards people. Interestingly this is not what one can fake, because the high animal intellect nature in human beings allows individuals to differentiate between leaders who are using them for their own gain and those who genuinely want to help them succeed.

The level of trust, respect and admiration you enjoy from subordinates depends on your character. While poor leaders demand respect, influential leaders command respect. Where people believe they can approach you for solutions, the organisation stand to gain by consensus and the converse of which usually leads to disaffection and poor performance among the ranks.

Aspiring leaders should know that if you lack genuine followership in your current position, it is not likely that people will follow you when you reach the top. Therefore think influence not position.

6.0 Conclusion

If the natural law of succession is imminent, what about the preparation for the natural successors? After professional registrations the main areas where challenges of future leadership emanate, can be broadly grouped under the following:

- Technical and business skills acquisition
- Quality leadership development
- The role of top company management

The simple truth is now identified that, the central issue sustaining the business objectives of any consultancy firm is the ability to serve, attract new and maintain the existing client base. No matter the quality of technical expertise or leadership skills obtainable in an organisation, availability of clients is the life line of our business.

With this realisation in mind, I tried to look closely on the word C-L-I-E-N-T, and what emerges in form of an acrostic is an interesting revelation which reflects the expected attributes of any aspiring good client hunter and manager.

C – Develop a *character* for positive *change*

L – Provide influential *Leadership*

I – Be flexibly *Inquisitive* and *independent* minded

E – Be *Effective* and Ethically *Enterprising*

N – Be *Nice* and a *Natural Negotiator*

T – Exhibit *Talents* and *Tact*

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