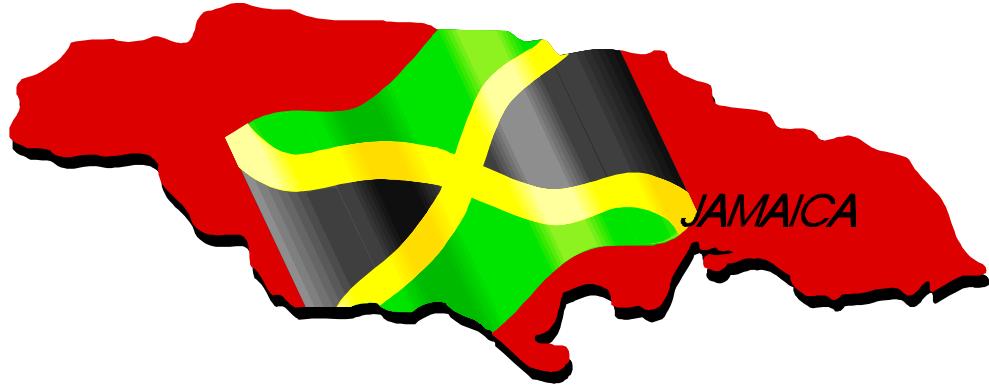

HIGHLIGHTS FROM "WHY WORKERS WON'T WORK - A CASE STUDY OF JAMAICA"

BY KENNETH L.CARTER

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It certainly would not come as a surprise to many to discover that there is extensive dissatisfaction, anxiety and demotivation amongst the Jamaican labour force. The history of union and management face-offs, the frustrated and angry faces of newly dislocated workers on the evening news and the long lines ever present at the US embassy bear testament to that. Still, Kenneth Carter's report on his in-depth studies of worker attitudes towards their work, management and pay is sobering and provides a gut-wrenching view of the depth of the malaise crippling Jamaica's workforce. While the studies discussed were carried out between 1974 and 1988, the author himself is quick to point out that subsequent assessments have only reinforced the earlier findings..

The complete book that this paper summarizes is **Why Workers Won't Work: The worker in a developing economy. A case study of Jamaica**, by Kenneth L. Carter, published by Macmillan Education Ltd, London and Basingstoke, UK. The ISBN number is 0-333-67989-X and it is available from select booksellers.

Background

The studies were initiated as a result of a specific request from a subsidiary of the Tourism Board for Mr. Carter to carry out a national attitudinal survey of workers in the Tourism industry. Since the problem to be studied was perceived as one which widely impacted the various industrial sectors in the country and which also had far-reaching and extensive consequences, the decision was made to extend it to other sectors. The studies reflect the responses of some 10,800 workers across organizational levels, namely senior and middle managers, first-line supervisors and rank-and-file workers. Major industry sectors covered include manufacturing, banking and finance, health, education, transportation, utilities, services, agriculture and tourism. Questionnaires were the main source of input. In addition, input was garnered using other techniques such as interviews and rap sessions in an effort to not hinder participation when literacy levels or attitudes towards providing written feedback on such issues would have been an insurmountable barrier.

The premise of the study is that it is workers themselves who can give us a true picture of what belies the productivity and morale problems afflicting the workforce. For several years there have been many executives, managers, consultants, academics and others bemoaning the fact that the Jamaican worker does not want to work and in fact only wants to get more money for less work. The results of the study turn this commonly held opinion upside down.

Ultimately, Mr. Carter invites interested parties to consider that workers are in fact responding in a rational manner to the perceived inequities and stress of their work environments.

General Study Results

- Only some 24% of the workers described themselves as motivated, and only 3% were revealed to be highly motivated (with a relatively higher percentage of the latter group being first-line supervisors)
- An overwhelming 76% of the respondents were found to be generally demotivated, with some 40 percent considered to be marginally or not at all retrievable.

A common theme that echoed throughout regarding the underlying contributing causes was the general attitude of management towards workers. Workers cited the lack of respect and recognition, poor communication, lack of involvement in decision-making and general disregard for workers as human beings as key factors in their general contempt for and lack of confidence in management. This last factor in particular was a source of much anguish, anger and resentment among workers, fuelled by the perception that "management does not understand workers' problems, does not understand workers and is not interested in workers as human beings". Given the pervasive nature of this kind of opinion and comments in interviews, questionnaire responses and general feedback, the decision was made by the author/researcher to test its validity.

A number of supervisors and middle managers were given a list of ten morale factors. They were asked to rank them in terms of personal importance and then according to how they would expect the workers they supervised to rank them. Finally, they were to have those they supervised rank the factors themselves. The major findings were as follows:

Other Findings

■ The managers gave higher rankings to those "softer" psychological factors that are generally considered humanizing, including recognition and appreciation, feeling involved, promotion and growth and having work that is interesting. However, when they in turn completed the ranking according to how they would expect those they supervised to rank them, higher priority was given to factors such as wages, fringe benefits, job security, etc.

■ The rank-and-file workers own rankings gave similar priority to the same psychological factors that had been highly ranked by the supervisor/managers. In short, there were no significant differences between the actual rankings of the managerial workers and the rank-and-file workers they supervised.

As the author points out, the results of this particular study highlight the dissonance between the two groups.

Communication, such as it exists, is clearly insufficient to have either group appreciate the preferences, priorities or viewpoints of the other. This breakdown is very costly given its impact on worker motivation and satisfaction.

What lies at the root of all of this is debatable. What is clear is that while supervisors may be promoted from the ranks, once promoted they fail to maintain the confidence of their former peers. Carter indicates that the newly appointed supervisors "seem to develop an acute case of amnesia concerning their social or national roots". In addition his observations suggest that becoming a supervisor means subscribing to a certain set of beliefs and behaviors that are expected and "implicitly or explicitly dictated and rewarded by management", behaviors which tend to be anti-worker and which lead to the mistrust and alienation of the rank-and-file. Interestingly enough, supervisors and middle managers themselves displayed a lack of confidence in their own immediate bosses that was quite similar to the lack of confidence displayed by the rank-and-file workers towards them. If the earlier observations are accurate, this result is not surprising, given that upper management could be expected to subscribe to the same set of beliefs and behaviors they are expecting of the front-line supervisors, with similar results being produced. Overall, the vote of no-confidence is highlighted by the following statistic:-

■ Nearly 60% of both supervisory and rank-and-file workers said they would fire top management if given the chance.

A number of other interesting points and issues were highlighted by the study. These are summarized below:

While there is a Feeling that Local Management is a Problem, Expatriate Management is not the Automatic Answer

There is an ongoing debate about Jamaicans' preference for anything imported versus what is obtained from local sources. One perspective is that Jamaicans can be too "foreign-minded", feeling that local goods, services and expertise will automatically be inferior to anything imported. On the other hand, many Jamaicans will say that they are willing to try local products and services, except they often end up sorely disappointed with the unsatisfactory results.

What is clear is that while supervisors may be promoted from the ranks, once promoted they fail to maintain the confidence of their former peers. ...

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To support that point of view, many point to a relatively fervent sense of loyalty and "strong feelings" for the country, for things Jamaican, national sports teams etc, even in the midst of the difficult times experienced by many, given the general socio-economic conditions. In terms of expatriate management in particular, there is one school of thought that expatriate managers are better than local managers in terms of their regard and treatment of workers and there is another school of thought that charges just the opposite. Based on the results of the study, Carter generally observes that the workers interviewed, while demonstrating little confidence in local management, were not then ready to turn around and embrace expatriate management automatically. The following results were noted:

Only a relatively small percentage showed any clear preference for local managers over expatriate managers or vice versa.

Some 51% of rank-and-file workers considered both unacceptable.

There was no statistical evidence to suggest that workers were anti-local. The problem appeared to be one of rapport, empathy and mutual trust

In addition he makes the statistical observation that "there is a strong racial or nationalistic loyalty to local managers [which] forces workers into a state of ...conflict in which they argue 'local managers are one of us, we should want them but with their attitudes, we dare not have them...'"

Other jarring results of the study begin to reveal the underside of worker dissatisfaction and management style issues.....

Most Workers are Dissatisfied with their Jobs in Terms of Being Afforded Feelings of Self-Worth, Recognition, Appreciation, Achievement, etc.

Over 76% of workers were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied

Most Workers Feel that their Skills and Education are Underutilized on the Job, Further Undermining their Confidence in Management

Over 51% of supervisors and 83% of rank-and-file workers considered their skills and education to be under-utilized.

Rank-and-File Workers Do Not See their Jobs as Being Relevant to the Organization's Objectives

Some 65% of the rank-and-file workers considered their jobs to be unimportant in relation to the objectives of their organization.

Interestingly enough, while some 63% of supervisors saw their jobs as important to the objectives, they rarely ever knew what these objectives were when asked.

The Prevailing (and Failing) Management Style Appears to be Management by Edict

Some 66% of supervisors and 80% of rank-and-file workers reported that they are rarely, if ever, consulted about changes that affect their jobs.

A random sample of some sixty actual free-form comments from the rank-and-file workers displayed a prevailing perception that even supervisors themselves are rarely informed about what is going on in the company

Poor Communication is a Common Complaint and Contributes Greatly to an Environment of Mistrust

Some 65% of rank-and-file workers and 44% of supervisors cited the grapevine as their most common source for learning what was going on in the company. In addition, nearly 18% of supervisors cited their most common source as people outside of the company or the newspapers.

Less than 20% of supervisors and only 7% of workers named either their own supervisor or an official bulletin as their primary source.



While Management May Be Interested in Training Workers To Do a Better Job, They Do a Very Poor Job of It

- While some 43 % of the supervisory workers feel that management is interested in training them to do a better job, 58% of the same group feel that management is doing a poor or very poor job of on-the-job training and guidance and 68% feel that an even worse job of training is being done through formal course and seminars.
- On the other hand, nearly 80% of the rank-and-file workers feel that management is interested in training them to do a better job with 60% deeming on-the-job training to be poor and 82% indicating that the seminars provided are either of very bad quality or are irrelevant to their job functions.

Finally, the study results do point to workers actions and attitudes being driven by a particular kind of logic that arises inside the context of what they experience.

Workers are Aware of their Underproduction and the Impact this has on National Development

- While workers were aware of their sub-optimal performance, they did not perceive themselves to be an integral part of the problem. Two of the top five contributing factors in their opinion are poor fringe benefits/inhuman working conditions and the poor treatment of workers by management.
- Workers non-productive behavior is viewed by them to be a viable and necessary survival response to the hostile culture in which they work.

The Majority of Workers Do Not Feel They Will Benefit Financially From Higher Production

- Some 84% of workers disagreed with the following statement "In general, the more workers produce, the more management earns, the more workers will benefit in terms of higher wages and better fringe benefits".

They in fact believe that pay increases are due to factors not related to production, a belief that incorporates the following themes: a) workers will only produce more to their detriment for a management that takes everything for itself, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. b) workers who are already exploited and underpaid, should not have to produce any more for increased pay and benefits.... c) management is dishonest and will not pay more than they are forced to....

Factors Other Than Merit/Production are the Principal Determinants of Pay and Pay Increases

- Nearly a third of the participants felt that the "willingness and ability to carry news" (gossip) was the factor most responsible for determining pay and pay increases. Whether or not "you were liked by your superior" and "your boss' influence with top management" were ranked second and third respectively.

More Pay is Not the Answer to Increasing Worker Productivity or Satisfaction

- Some 89% of the workers chose factors representing quality of life issues vs. compensation as the one thing that would make them more productive and satisfied on the job. Training, recognition and appreciation and a greater level of participation in decision-making all ranked higher.
- This is further reinforced by the results of another question. When asked what is the one thing they would change about their jobs, should they have the power to do so, nearly 40% of workers said they wanted "more recognition and appreciation". "More pay" ranked fourth, after "an improvement in the personnel and industrial relations departments and better physical accommodation"

When all is said and done, the Carter studies at minimum shed some much needed light on the underlying attitudes contributing to the malaise, discontent and poor productivity often found in the Jamaican workplace. While Jamaican managers have done the proverbial weeping, moaning and gnashing of teeth at the situation, it has typically been in the context of being the innocent victims of legions of workers who "want the money, but don't want to work".

That long-held belief stands in contrast to the scenario in foreign countries where the diligence of immigrant Jamaican workers and their willingness to work at multiple jobs to get ahead is so well-recognized, it has been parodied on major network shows such as "In Living Color" and in general comic circles. To date there has been little by way of debate or study to effectively get to the heart of the factors contributing to that contrasting behavior, other than an acknowledgement that "America (or whatever foreign country being discussed) is very different and Jamaicans have to adapt to a whole new way of life when they go abroad".

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For those willing to confront the more damning implications of the Carter studies however, there is definitely a method to the madness of workers' refusal to work in Jamaica. The inescapable conclusion is that a significant share of the responsibility for workers' attitudes rests squarely at the feet of the management cadre leading Jamaica's business environment. Jamaican management's own attitudes, behaviors and tendency to harbor a "do as I say, not as I do" attitude has in fact been the breeding ground for the culture of low productivity and malaise gripping the nation. In response, the Jamaican worker has gone past their own weeping and moaning and retreated into a hard shell of lethargy, resignation and despair. Occasionally, they emerge to seek revenge for their predicament through vengeful acts, bitter outbursts and vehement demands for increased wages and benefits. Ad-hoc training programs, seminars and motivational speakers have added a band-aid here and there, without dealing with the underlying issues of the business culture that contribute to the challenging environment.

The question that now remains is whether or not management will remain trapped in the same old cycle of frustration, inefficiency and poor results or take a deep breath and throw the spotlight on themselves in an effort to create fundamental change in the work culture. It is not an exaggeration to state that the future of the country is at stake. Compelling, decisive and effective action is needed to address the challenges at hand. KK

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