

Words are plentiful, but deeds are precious



column

Monday night. It's 39 degrees Celsius. The air conditioning reduces the temperature to 27. The atmosphere is humid. I can smell the sea. Gunshots in the street. A mother and her child are lying in the gutter next to the factory. I am on my way to the hotel, escorted by armed men, flashing light and siren running. This is Lagos, Nigeria.

I have been invited to contribute to a process of change at a major company. Seldom have I heard a chief executive state such a powerful vision on how personal targets can be made subservient to both the individual and the organisation. Last month continued.

I have a first appointment with him early in the morning. A man of small stature, tailor-made suit, gold spectacles. Ibou is a man of influence in Nigeria. I am invited to observe his executive committee: "Better tell me straight away what I can do better to lead this team". And, with a broad grin: "Then I'll be the example, my team members will learn from me and I can call them to account.. We want to be the best and we don't have any time to waste. We want you to help us find the ways and means in order that our people develop their skills while working. To this end, we introduce three concepts, which each employee knows and utilises:

I know, which is about our company's ambition and our faith in this,

I am able to, meaning: I possess the skills to realise these goals, and

I will: I also want to do it, or even better, I do it.

You see, I want us to go from "I" to "we". The added value of people is embedded in cooperation and building on one another's ideas and competencies. And we can do so in teams."

This impressive man is asking me this question in an environment where people mostly do what the boss tells them to. More than that, if you don't you'll end up in the gutter. There is a tension in his question to his people to deploy their talents both for themselves and the company, while many are primarily trying to survive. And he confirms this, too!

I ask Ibou what drives him. Initially, he says: "It's my duty to work hard." Then he thinks for a while and adds: "I enjoy setting goals and realising them. I am autonomous, and that's what I want other people to experience also".

We walk back along the site; the mother and her child are still there. Ibou interrupts his flow of words and orders them to be transferred to a clinic.

"I believe we can excel. I don't feel the need to train skills just because of the skills. The thing is that people won't use these skills and develop them further until they're useful for them as well, to achieve their personal goals. They can only do so when they don't have to merely survive. I am already making an effort to offer them some form of social security by ensuring good wages and medical facilities, and also by providing training. I offer them the whole package. And, apart from this, we have to work on reshaping the hierarchical culture, so that our people add their own value."

Wednesday night. I am working on this column at the airport. The air conditioning makes it possible to think. CNN is on the TV. Bush is still trying to find Bin Laden. "I'm sure my reports do the best they can to find these terrorists". He should talk to a few people in Lagos. And see what's written on the wall of one of their offices: "Word are plentiful but deeds are precious".

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