

Businesses need to invest in frontline, middle managers – Onalaja

Category: Capabilities, People and Organisation Improvement, Talent Acquisition

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*Roselyn Onalaja, managing consultant at [StreSERT Integrated Limited](#), a management consulting firm, speaks with **BUNMI BAILEY** on what organisations operating in Nigeria need to do to navigate the current economic uncertainties.*

Given the current volatile and complex economic environment that has caused several local firms to shut down and global brands to leave Nigeria, what do you think should be the key imperatives for businesses?

In Nigeria and indeed globally, we are seeing a level of disruption that arguably, we have not seen in a generation. It is unfortunately a fact that some companies will fail, as we are seeing, while some others will survive and thrive.

While several interlinked factors set successful companies apart – a winning strategy, organisational resilience, innovation DNA, and great culture – perhaps the single most dominant factor is leadership.

And by leadership, I do not only mean business leaders or leaders in the C-Suite but the leadership team of a firm including frontline managers and so-called middle managers who we believe are the unheralded heroes of many a successful business. I believe businesses need to begin to focus more on developing these frontline and middle managers.



Shouldn't the focus be on CEOs and other top executives?

While the CEO can play an outsized role in the success of any organisation, what great CEOs and business leaders realise, and this is a position we hold and promote, is that they can only be as effective as their management team which includes these frontline and middle managers I mentioned.

What we have seen in our work is that most organisations in Nigeria do not realise the importance of their managers and when they do attach some importance, are not deliberate in upskilling and empowering them and in providing the organisational environment for them to thrive.

And we have also seen how this has placed a ceiling on their productivity and corporate performance. So, while it might seem counterintuitive, what I think organisations should be focusing on now is building out their management cadre.

Could you share more on why you think organisations should be investing in their middle management now and how it is a pathway to their survival and success?

Not just their middle management, but their frontline managers too. But, let me be clear. I believe that for organisations to survive and succeed now and beyond this period of uncertainty, they will need to turbocharge their performance which will require harmonising their strategy, management practices, and investments as part of a larger, dynamic system.

However, to succeed at this, they need a strong management team. Several studies have shown a strong correlation between organisational health and performance and having strong managers.

Having a strong cadre of frontline and middle managers is not just nice to have, it is a business imperative because these managers are vital to the success of any change or transformation effort.

They are the ones who translate the strategy into work streams and projects and help bring the strategic goals to reality. They do the real work interacting with customers in the real world and interfacing with staff at the frontlines.

Are there other roles that middle management staff play to drive organisational growth?

They also play a key part in talent management. We know that managers are the biggest determinant of employees' experiences, satisfaction, and performance at work. It is the relationships that they build that enhance team dynamics and improve productivity and performance.

They have an outsized impact on the way employees work, their productivity, their unit performance, and consequently the organisational performance.

This is particularly critical for businesses operating in Nigeria as their managers will be the ones who have to create a workspace that does not worsen already tense personal circumstances (given the increasing cost of living) and one that employees want to come to. Thus, creating psychological safety and reducing attrition.

Given how much impact these managers have on the success of an organisation, local organisations need to begin viewing managers as "value multipliers" and acknowledging that investing in developing strong managers will deliver substantial economic returns.

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