

Injecting Key Elements into the Professionalization of the Liberian Public Service to Optimize Service Delivery

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Abstract

This paper discusses and analyzes the problems that new government entrants or joiners: presidential appointees, elected officials, consultants and civil servants face as they work in public service in Liberia. The Government of Liberia seems to lack an established process of systematically undertaking an onboarding process that ensures institutional/organization socialization of institutional strangers to become effective institutional insiders who are conversant with and cognizant of and use the rules and regulations as well as institutional cultures, norms, traditions, ethics and values aligned with relevant laws to properly guide their *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* in public service. As such, some of these public servants who take their offices and are told that “this is how we have been doing it before” plunge themselves into their responsibilities, making inconsequential errors that with time compound and metamorphose into colossal public service misdeeds that inescapably entangle them in audit reports for which public service culminates unfortunately into public torment. Not everyone who enters public service embarks on a journey to line his or her pocket. However, without a proper orientation and onboarding process that ensures that new government entrants or joiners are at least informed about the dos and don'ts as outlined in the Standing Orders of the Civil Service, the Public Financial Management Law (PFM Law), the Public Procurement and Concessions Law (PPCC Law), the Code of Conduct (CoC), Government of Liberia Revised Travel Ordinance and other instruments, the avalanche of mistakes that they make will get them stuck in the barbed wires of reports of the Auditor General (AG) of the Republic of Liberia. Hence, this paper calls for self-education on the part of the joiners as well as a program by the Government of Liberia that helps to provide proper and adequate orientation.

Keywords

Government Entrant or Joinee, Orientation, Onboarding, Institutional Socialization

1. Introduction and Identification of the Problem

Service in the public sphere in Liberia has been marred by perceived and actual noncompliance with relevant laws, ordinances, rules, and regulations for which it appears that public servants, especially appointed officials and senior civil servants who are entrusted with the responsibilities to manage people and money are deemed corrupt before proven themselves free of corruption through the discharge of their responsibilities. This ghost haunts even the honest, clean, and most honorable men and women who enter public service. The noncompliance can be usually captured in reports of the Auditor General of the Republic of Liberia who operates by the rules to call a spade a spade and calls for accountabilities of thousands and in some instances millions of dollars spent outside of the applicable laws by their spenders.

The Constitution of Liberia (1986) gives the president the power to nominate and with the consent of the senate appoint and commission all cabinet ministers, judges, ambassadors, sheriffs, county officials, and military officers whom he or she can dismiss and or recall from office at his or her discretion. Often than not, these officials subsequently appoint other senior civil servants like the financial comptrollers, human resource directors, procurement directors, etc. to help them manage the staffers and resources of the ministries, agencies, commissions, and corporations they direct and manage. When the officials and those the president hires to run the entities are all new entrants or joinees, the lack of established programs, processes, and procedures to train, onboard, and organizationally socialize them leaves them with little or no alternatives but to navigate their ways through management by operation. In such cases, they are vulnerable to incremental mistakes with disastrous reputational damage. A good number of them often assume their roles and become too bossy to dig deeper into and better understand what to do and what not to do. Those who are unfortunate to hire incurable yes-men but not top-notch professionals, who will even disagree with their suggestions that do not comply with relevant laws unfortunately sink deeper and deeper every time they affix their signatures to finance, procurement, and human resource documents.

2. Research Methodology

This article uses a qualitative technique via a case study method that helps explore to understand the effects of a particular situation (Schoch, 2020). The technique is useful in research that is “concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena” (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2001) and helps the researcher understand “the underlying reasons, attitudes, and motivations” behind certain

behaviors (Rosenthal, 2016). Cropley (2015) argues that qualitative research looks at how humans use every day experiences to understand a situation by using “their own minds” and also using “their own words”, and providing explanations for the “cause and effects of relationships.” The utilization of this methodology helps a researcher understand, interpret, and make sense of social realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mohajan, 2018).

3. Knowledge Contribution

This paper seeks to contribute to knowledge by highlighting the gap that exists between getting appointed, elected, or hired to public office and the responsible, intelligent and informed execution of responsibilities assigned to the offices to which people get appointed, elected or hired. Schoch (2020) postulates that by conclusions that result from the analysis, a researcher tends to better recognize the correlation between an occurrence and an event of inquiry. This paper will align the correlation between occurrences and the recommendations.

4. Theoretical Framework Underpinning This Study

This research work is guided and underpinned by the combination of cognitive learning theory which emphasizes that employees are fully engaged in the learning process and that they gain a deep understanding of the material and constructivism emphasizes how learners play a role in creating meaning and knowledge through experience. The cognitive theory of learning deals with how learning works meaningfully, especially when learners encounter the appropriate cognitive processing as learning takes place through interacting with essential information contained in the lessons that are presented to enable the use of learned materials under new conditions that manifest improvement (Huang et al., 2024). It would require selecting, organizing and integrating information contained in lectures presented in ways that create new knowledge that can be used to change and improve one’s approaches (Cavanagh & Kiersch, 2023; Mayer, 2022). It encourages and leads to continuing professional development (CPD) which is a learning method that has proven to help improve people’s knowledge, professional practice, and skills that lead to the maintenance of “high professional standard” (Kjaer et al., 2017; Holm, 1998). Via this means, one keeps his or her skills and knowledge updated. Through this process, new government entrants or joiners will become creative, have a boost of confidence, improve their decision-making, and increase interest in their roles with better preparedness to discharge their responsibilities effectively to achieve results. For its part, constructivism as a theory of learning posits that students construct their own knowledge through learning that comes through concepts that are conceived by the teacher(s) through necessary research and transferred to students who wish to learn a particular subject matter of interest to them (Duffy, 1996; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, Fosnot, 1996; Scholnik et al., 2006; von Glasersfeld, 2012). It is predicated upon the aforementioned that the thread that has woven this paper has been tightened and strengthened by the

smooth combination of cognitive learning and constructivism theories that make it reasonable for both the Government of Liberia and new government entrants and joiners to take interest in processes that adequately inform and enlighten them about various instruments that govern and guide their work.

5. Some Key Factors Contributing to Nonadherence to Relevant Laws and Procedures across Government

In government, when there are new entrants (civil servants or presidential appointees), at least as I know it, there is no induction training to properly onboard the newly employed civil servants or presidential appointees. This is the reality that I have seen during my time in government as a civil servant at the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and as a presidential appointee in the roles of Assistant Superintendent for Development of Nimba County at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Assistant Minister for Youth Development at the Ministry of Youth and Sports. An onboarding and training process, that transcends the mere supply of description of tasks/job descriptions which is often the case, would go a mighty long way in informing, educating, and familiarizing new government entrants with the Standing Orders of the Civil Service, the Public Financial Management Law (PFM Law), the Public Procurement and Concessions Law (PPCC Law), the Code of Conduct Law, GOL Travel Ordinance, and other relevant instruments to guide their *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* in public service is not normally or usually provided.

The Standing Orders for the Civil Service of Liberia outlines the rules and procedures for civil servants in the country; the Public Procurement and Concessions Act (PPCA) of Liberia regulates all public procurement and concession activities in public service in the country ([Amendment and Restatement of the Public Procurement and Concessions Act, 2010](#)); while the PFM Law “lays out fundamental procedures for the preparation, adoption, execution and final accounts of the National Budget and related matters including, internal control, accounting and auditing of public finances, assets as well as the arrangements for public debt and government guarantees” ([Public Finance Management Act, 2009](#)). The Code of Conduct (CoC) for Public Officials seeks to ensure that public officials and employees perform their duties with integrity, impartiality, and transparency ([National Code of Conduct for All Public Officials and Employees of the Government of the Republic of Liberia, 2014](#)). The CoC also forbids officials and officers of the Government of Liberia from misusing their offices through the solicitation of favors in return for employment or other benefits. It seeks to ensure that public officials and officers accept their legal and moral responsibilities to utilize public resources in transparent and accountable ways. It seeks to foster a professional ambiance wherein public officials and officers, especially civil servants are shielded from unnecessary political influence in the discharge of their various duties. The Code of Conduct is an essential instrument of good governance that seeks to guarantee that decisions relative to appointment and payment made in public service

are not bias and partisan but consequent upon one's abilities, knowledge, and skills.

Additionally, effective October 17, 2016, the Government of Liberia introduced a revised ordinance with defined tariffs that apply to all foreign and domestic travels undertaken by officials and employees of the Government of Liberia's ministries, agencies, and commissions (MACs) ([Government of Liberia Revised Travel Ordinance, 2016](#)). Cardinaly, the Ordinance was developed and is being operationalized to ensure not only compliance with stipulated tariffs but also the smooth processing of travel requests.

6. A Few Challenges Worthy of Highlighting

Without the necessary onboarding and training, newly hired or appointed officers/officials are left by themselves to learn from people who usually tell them "that's how we have been doing it before." Whether the "that's how we have been doing it before" is right or wrong, bad or good or ugly or fine, some unsuspecting new entrants, some of them out of the desire not to stall government operations, plunge themselves into the swimming pool of "that's how we have been doing it before" and proceed as usual without any guiderail. At the end of the day, simple mistakes multiply and accumulate into an avalanche of errors that contravene the PFM and PPCC Laws and the Standing Orders for which auditors from the General Auditing Commission do not forgive them. The auditors rightfully deploy the legal principle "ignorance of the law is no excuse" which means that nobody can claim ignorance of the law as a basis or defense for breaking a law. What is worth noting is the fact that these auditors usually come after several months and years, and the net result of the mountainous errors manifests itself in the Auditor General's reports that often call on the auditees to account for thousands if not millions of dollars and violations of procurement laws, personnel issues and other nonfinancial violations by MACs. It is here that the auditees' public service painfully metamorphoses into public anguish as they get named names that leave their families, friends, and loved ones not being proud of them and their avowed opponents/enemies endlessly badmouth them during and after their public services. They might have entered government with a better character but might ultimately leave with battered and shattered character.

Some appointees and civil servants respect the advice of the Internal Audit Agency's (IAA's) assigned internal auditors, while some appointees and civil servants bossily sidestep and overrule the financially Solomonian advice of IAA's assigned auditors. For the former, public service ends in public honor, while for the latter public service ends in "torture by the public." The argument is not that some enter public service with or without noble ideas. It depends on who wants to be what and how. But with appropriate training and guidance, the noble and ignoble will be easily identified and given their appropriate places in society.

7. Onboarding, Organizational Socialization, and Orientation

[Kumar and Pandey \(2017\)](#) have argued that onboarding is "a bigger umbrella"

that encompasses induction which is a process that covers one day or a week during which time joinees of an institution are exposed to the institution's benefits, mission, policies, and vision. O'Brien (2013) captures the essence of an onboarding process as necessary to get the joinees quickly engaged with the work to enhance productivity from the get-go. It is a conscious process that ensures that staffers in new roles are quickly brought up to speed to enhance efficiency (Bradt & Vonnegut, 2009). It is a very useful organizational socialization process that helps newly hired officials and staffers of an institution or organization to smoothly graduate from being "organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders" by way of acquiring the necessary behavior, knowledge, and skills that they need for success in a new work environment or organization (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Such an organizational socialization process helps the joinees understand the history, beliefs, ethical responsibilities, and common conditions that an organization needs to flourish and actualize its ambitions and internal morals and makes them to easily transition from being organizational strangers to insiders (Adil et al., 2023; Bauer et al., 2007; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006).

New government entrants or joinees' orientation is a useful means by which joinees are provided essential and fundamental institutional information that is cardinal in helping them know their team(s), department(s), and institution(s) they are joining. It provides a process through which institutional expectations and policies are presented, while at the same time creating a room for relevant questions to be asked and answered in preparation for newcomers or joinees to properly transition into their newly assumed roles. This is important to help day-to-day productivity and efficiency in a new work environment. Orientation for new employees is an important component of joinees' development that is significant in socializing them and increasing the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) they need to help them achieve institutional results and meet the expectations for which they are hired in the first place. Through orientation, an institution's goals, history, and values, as well as language, jargon, and decision-making processes, are outlined to help joinees properly situate themselves in their new work environments and bring them face-to-face with the what, the how, and the why of the roles to which they have been hired (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Robbins, 2002; Wanous & Reichers, 2000).

Orientation requires the provision of information that includes but is not limited to the goals, history, mission, objectives, and vision of the institution. It encapsulates the discussion of relevant policies, procedures, standards, and laws applicable to the work of the joinees: relevant of role expectations and responsibilities of the joinees, touring of the office, especially the joinees' work area, and introduction to coworkers and departments of the institution(s) and seeking to obtain the joinees' feedback after orientation with the intent to improve the process for future joinees. The usually vague expectations of joinees before beginning a job are addressed by institutional socialization that calls for adapting to the values,

norms, and behaviors of the institution which helps to address the variance between joiners' expectations and their authentic experiences following the commencement of their jobs. The onboarding process is the universal set or the umbrella that contains and covers orientation, induction, and institutional socialization.

During the orientation that would involve familiarization with relevant laws, rules, regulations, procedures, and standards, these are other training courses that need to be considered for an effective public service:

- 1) Ethics and Integrity.
- 2) An Introduction to Gender Equality.
- 3) Information Security Awareness.
- 4) Record Management.
- 5) Preventing Fraud and Corruption.
- 6) Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.
- 7) Human Rights Responsibilities.
- 8) Preventing Sexual Harassment and other Prohibited Conduct.

8. Recommendations

This paper recognizes the need to advance a few recommendations that will be quite helpful to decision-makers to improve the effectiveness of actions they take, especially based on information that is evidence-based and intended to enhance efficiency and productivity across the government line ministries, agencies, commissions, and corporations, after identifying key areas for improvement to contribute to positive outcomes as the government seeks to address the bread and butter issues of Liberia. Hence, I advance the following recommendations:

1) Firstly, all new government entrants (appointed, recruited, or accommodated) should purposefully seek to self-educate properly and adequately using relevant laws (PMF, PPCC, and the Standing Orders) and other regulations before starting to sign government documents or else you will get caught up in the barbed wire of audits.

2) Secondly, all new governmental entrants should seek to know and familiarize themselves with the human resources, financial management and procurement manuals of their entity(ies). If your entity(ies) doesn't/don't have any, proceed, especially heads of entities and presidential appointees, to ensure that they are developed in consultation with relevant entities and use them as your guides so that you do not end up in the ditch of public service.

3) The government needs to use the Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA) working with the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP), the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (PPCC), Governance Commission, and the Civil Service Agency to develop a curriculum that is used to train all new entrants before they assume their responsibilities. Here, the President of the Republic and the various heads of ministries, agencies, commissions and corporations need to receive the training certificates from LIPA before commissioning or deploying their new appointees and civil servants respectively.

4) To new government entrants/joinees who sidestep the advice of IAA's assigned internal auditors and proceed as they wish, just know that you are simply digging your professional grave as the audit reports could plunge you into the bottomless pit of public disgrace, end you in handcuffs, or force you to self-exile for fear of being imprisoned for your financial misdeeds resulting from your lack of carefulness.

5) No matter what qualifications and experiences one has acquired, enter and leave public service as a very humble person. Like the late Professor Jones Dopoe said, "power is like a Kru canoe that is quick to capsize." Build relationships and treat everyone with respect so that with or without power, you are respected and loved.

6) One of the most important documents that new government entrants/joinees need to consult, read, and acquaint themselves with is the report of the Auditor General (AG) of the Republic of Liberia, especially the one that concerns one's entity. Among other things, this report essentially identifies the missteps of managers of people and money for which the AG spares not the rod in full preparedness to whip and discipline anyone who follows suit.

9. Conclusion

Until the Government of Liberia realizes the importance of a systematic process that smoothly turns institutional outsiders who become joinees into institutional insiders by and through the impartation of knowledge of the Standing Orders of the Civil Service, the Public Financial Management Law (PFM Law), the Public Procurement and Concessions Law (PPCC Law), the Code of Conduct (CoC) and other relevant instruments as well as skills needed to effectively and efficiently perform one's work, public service is a tricky environment that would require self-education to eschew the joy of public service being the agony of public service. All institutions that espouse productivity pay keen attention to taking steps to ensure that their staff have not only the necessary qualifications but most importantly the skills and necessary familiarization with institutional values, traditions, cultures, values, and ethics. The Government of Liberia cannot afford to be an exception. That is why a new element of the culture in public service, the provision of necessary orientation and onboarding within the spirit of organizational socialization, needs to be welcomed, introduced, internalized, and operationalized.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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