

When the hunter became the hunted

As soon as Margaret Adong, a Human Resource (HR) practitioner, walked into her new workplace, began her work by conducting an HR audit to guide her performance plan. However, it quickly became apparent that her job description bore little resemblance to reality

BY JOAN SALMON

When Margaret Adong, a Human Resource (HR) practitioner walked into her new workplace, she was full of anticipation. A new field, a new office, a long-awaited promotion and better pay lay ahead. Excited felt inadequate. She began her work by conducting an HR audit to guide her performance plan. It quickly became apparent that her job description bore little resemblance to reality. The work on paper did not match what was practised daily. Still, she remained hopeful, convinced that with structure and goodwill, systems could be built and a strong team formed.

What troubled her, however, was a persistent question. Was this change something management genuinely wanted?

When change threatens power

As weeks passed, the realities of the organisation became clearer; that while meaningful change must begin at the top, externally driven change was unwelcome. It disrupted comfort, challenged authority and unsettled the informal power structures built to protect a few people.

Her first management meeting was telling. Although she had performance reports, the meeting took an unexpected turn. For hours, leaders discussed staff with the sole agenda of criticising and demeaning them.

"They called it positive criticism," Adong recalls.

Disturbed, she stepped out briefly to take a phone call and did not return. Later, a colleague explained: "That is how it has always been. We do not bother with reports because the direction of these meetings is already decided on the dining table."

Decisions made elsewhere

Soon, formal management meetings were replaced by small, informal accountability discussions involving two or three people. Adong says it was evident that junior managers were forced to shoulder responsibilities far beyond their authority, constantly navigating the tension between what was ethical and what was permissible.

The workplace, she observed, was characterised by abuse, fear, harassment and gossip driven from the top. Respect was scarce.

One day, a department head approached her with a complaint that staff had stopped attending departmental meetings and wanted warning letters issued.

Instead of responding punitively, Adong chose to listen, over an informal lunch.

"Why are you no longer attending departmental meetings?" Adong asked.

They responded, "Do you want us to speak to you as HR, or can we talk freely with Margaret?"



EXITING

Lubowa says many HR professionals suffer silently and forget to seek help. It is important that they find mechanisms of continuously filling their emotional banks by seeking help through mentorship. "Seeking allies among colleagues and finding support through mentorship can help HR practitioners feel support in their life struggles," she advises. Documenting concerns is incredibly useful because should one decide to escalate issues, a record of incidents can strengthen their case. Addressing toxic workplaces requires awareness, support, and sometimes, the courage to move on. "When your non-negotiables are being infringed on, it is confirmation that you need to move on," she says.

Signs of a toxic workplace

Eva Lubowa, the Human Resource Director at Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority (PPDA) says one major sign of a toxic workplace is poor communication, coupled with a lack of transparency.

"When there is no clarity in an employee's deliverables, it causes confusion and a frustrating work environment," she says.

Secondly, high or an increasing employee turnover rate shows that a workplace is toxic. That is because most employees don't run away from an employer but from their boss or supervisor.

"Constant resignations point to a frustrating boss and failing structures."

Additionally, behaviours such as bullying, micromanagement, gossip and blame severely damage employees' mental health, productivity, and trust.

"A negative environment filled with gossip and blame can really impact productivity. It is difficult for an employee to excel at work when the mood is consistently sour," she says.

Surviving a toxic workplace

A toxic workplace is quite draining but can anyone survive? Lubowa says one way is by setting boundaries. For example, employees need to protect their personal time and mental health.

"Many employees do not know that it is important to separate work from personal life, especially in a toxic environment. That is why personal boundaries are key," she says.

However, fighting alone is equally draining. That is why seeking support from colleagues, mentor or external mentors can be a game changer.

"It helps to have allies who understand what you're going through. My experience is that a challenge shared is a challenge half-solved," Lubowa says.

Documentation of toxic habits also helps because at times, management will only act when an incident is documented.

"Keeping detailed records can help when addressing issues with management or HR," she says. These also come in handy should you choose to seek legal redress as they act as evidence.

Power without accountability

To foster accountability, Adong pushed for a more active board to offer oversight and restraint. Although one was eventually established, she soon discovered that despite being composed of influential individuals, it was merely advisory and held no governing power.

Her heart sank because dismissals based on flimsy reasons such as annoying the untouchables continued. In this workplace, rumours travelled faster than facts, and performance was frequently overshadowed by politics. Decisions were rarely grounded in evidence but instead served to preserve the status quo.

Adong continued to stand firm where she could, informing staff of their rights and explaining the law. Still, progress remained limited.

She also noticed that retreats were more of a formality than a bonding moment as staff had been bullied into silence. One moment that stands out was when an employee was blamed for something done by an untouchable superior that Adong had to step in. While the staff member was grateful, Adong was soon excluded from key decisions, persistently undermined and abusive language was openly used on her. Systems she had developed were deliberately weakened.

Margaret Adong, a Human Resource practitioner. PHOTO/JOAN SALMON.

Putting her professional title aside, Adong listened and the details were painful.

"How would you feel," one staff member asked, "waking up on a Monday full of energy, only to join an online meeting where a drunk supervisor insults you using vulgar language?"

Another added: "Do you know how humiliating it is to be insulted in front of partners?"

Although Adong was not entirely surprised, hearing it directly was deeply upsetting. What troubled her most was the realisation that some individuals in the organisation were effectively

untouchable, forcing everyone else to adapt and remain silent.

One evening, a colleague was instructed to find ways of removing a particular staff member from the organisation at all costs.

In theory, such matters are guided by labour laws, policy and due process but when a powerful leader wants someone out, procedure became irrelevant.

"I was told, 'you just never ask some questions,'" she says.

But how could this HR practitioner watch when she knew that a dismissal also negatively affected livelihoods of families and communities?

“Healing. Sometimes culture is choosing yourself. Much is said about organisational culture beginning at the top and about strategy shaping behaviour. These statements hold true. Yet there are moments when the most courageous decision is to walk away, knowing that staying would cost you your sanity, your health or your life.”

-Margaret Adong, a Human Resource practitioner.