

New **COYA** approach catches participants by surprise

By Mwangi Wanjumbi

IMAGINE DOING A take home examination and then scoring yourself - it would be surprising to fail under such circumstances. If anything, you would naturally award yourself the highest marks especially assuming that you have put in your best effort. And if there are many of you, the challenge of the chief examiner would be to understand why you deserve those high marks that you have already awarded yourself. That was the assessment tool used by the Company of the Year Assessment (COYA) consultants this year.

This year, COYA consultants visited participating companies in groups as has been the case in past years. But this time the mission was

different. In the past, consultants and participants sat in board rooms trying to understand the operations of a participating company and at the same time comparing this with best management practices as per the COYA process.

The new assessment tool has gone through continuous improvement over the years and the requisite changes necessitated modification of the assessment process too. Of course, the tool still benchmarks heavily from international best practices, especially as advocated by William Baldrige quality award of USA, the European award or even Kaizen the Japanese version of best management practices.

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One outstanding feature of the tool is that this time, it was being administered by the participating organizations on themselves, well before the arrival of the consultants. This means that the participants had full information on areas targeted by the assessment tool. The self awarded marks were therefore a measure of determining compliance with COYA requirements. Interestingly, some participating organizations as we found out were not even familiar with some areas being assessed yet they had awarded themselves handsome marks. And now that marks had been awarded, what was the role of the consultants?

After brief introductory meetings in the various organizations' board rooms, the consultants and senior management separated into different groups based on the areas of assessment. The consultants' role this time involved not only verifying the existence of the issues raised in the assessment tool but also determining consistency of management practices. Other aspects included the learning process and the extent to which the processes and procedures are embraced across the board. One key task was to verify the areas of improvement especially based on the existing strengths coupled with core competences and competitive advantages.

Incidentally, total quality management concepts recognize that no situation is ever perfect. There must always be room for improvement. The more the weaknesses the more the areas of improvement and consequently the lower the marks awarded independently by the consultants. Then, the more efficient the management processes that are in place in an organization, the higher the chances of achieving desired organizational objectives and goals. This therefore yields the desired overall results.

One of the most interesting observations however, is that some participants had quickly studied the assessment tool and hurriedly tried to improve on their weak areas before arrival of the consultants. But did they have a chance to cover themselves up



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fully? And then, how did they perceive this new approach?

Apparently, what most of the participants had not realized is that the tool did not just measure awareness of requirements but also consistency of application of these best management practices. And there had to be evidence of this constituency which more often than not was lacking or insufficient. Interestingly, majority of the participants were happy with the new arrangement which took shorter thus saving on productive time. A few however were unhappy about the absence of the seemingly flashy and lengthy presentations that were used to making. But, as I observed in a related article last year, there is nevertheless, a lot of learning that takes place in the COYA in the interest of all parties concerned. So far, we consultants have learnt that the COYA efforts are encouraging development of a culture of deep rooted management practices.



It was noted particularly that the participants take the final COYA reports seriously. Many new participants have in the recent past for example, given the human resource strategy the seriousness it deserves. Many have now engaged the services of articulate human resource managers with specific mandate of tapping and developing talent and innovation within the organizations. This has given rise to properly aligned and rigorous staff training and development programs whose result is continuous improvements in the different areas. A lot of weight has also been given on many organizational processes especially strategy and leadership amongst others.

These are great achievements for COYA indeed. It is worth noting that the human element is being recognized as the most crucial resource in any organization. Manipulation of the other resources must invaluablely depend on human beings no matter the extent of technological advancement. Embracing COYA is inevitably not only leading to application of best management practices but also resulting to employment creation too as the participating organizations continue on a growth trend. This has the effect of impacting positively not only to the national but also the global situation.

So far, it is notable that about 300 companies have participated in COYA since inception in 2000. Those that have been persistent have continued earning various awards both within and even outside COYA.

And for the Consultants too, COYA 2008 called for reaching out to diverse management skills. It also entailed superior ability of understanding and interpreting the COYA tool. Besides, report writing which was not mandatory for all consultants in the past became inevitable. This was so especially given the personalized evaluation of individual sectors of the COYA tool. ■

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