

The Secrets of African Managerial Success

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It has become fashionable to despair at the quality of African public sector management.¹ Generally the problem is attributed to the social and political context within which governmental activities must be conducted on the continent [see Hyden 1983; Moris 1981; Price 1975]. There is no doubt that the environment for public management is frequently inhospitable in Africa.

The environmental argument explains too much, however, and is thereby unduly pessimistic. It implies that almost all public sector activities should fail, since they are all subject to the same unfavourable environment. As Barbara Grosh has shown, a good number of indigenously managed Kenyan parastatals have in fact been successes [Grosh 1987]. The same can be said for many civil service initiatives. In these cases African managers have prevailed despite the inauspicious context within which they worked. Why and how? The answer is important to the developmental future of the continent.

In search of the secrets of African managerial success I am writing the biographies of four Kenyans who have been particularly effective in their management of rural development initiatives, that domain of public activity in which failure is most prevalent [Hirschman 1987; Israel 1987:18-26]. Within their life and career histories I have found some clues as to why they were able to breathe success on many of the enterprises which they led. Of course the resulting insights must be treated cautiously until they have been verified through quantitative research on a systematic sample of managers. I offer them now, not as proven generalisations, but to promote discussion and to strengthen our understanding of some of the forms of managerial behaviour that are at least possible on the continent.

The four men whom I have studied are: Charles Kibe Karanja, General Manager of the Kenya Tea Development Authority from 1970 to 1981; Harris Mutio Mule, who moved through the ranks of the Planning Department to become Permanent Secretary

of the Ministry of Finance from 1980 to 1986; Simeon Nyachae, Provincial Commissioner from 1964 to 1979, then head of the President's policy staff and finally Chief Secretary from 1983 to 1986; and Ishmael Muriithi, Director of Veterinary Services from 1966 to 1984. I have probed the lives of these men in considerable depth, interviewing them and their families, professional associates, friends and village acquaintances. Altogether I conducted nearly 300 interviews with almost 200 people in pursuit of these biographies.

The four men have varied in the extent and clarity of their success as public servants. The most unambiguous case is that of Charles Karanja. The Kenya Tea Development Authority is an internationally acknowledged success story [Paul 1982:11, 60-2] and Karanja saw it through its period of greatest growth, including its movement into the new and difficult areas of manufacturing and international marketing.

The choice of Simeon Nyachae is more controversial. His service to the President was always impeccable but some of the enterprises with which he was associated during his tenure as Provincial Commissioner did not have a positive developmental impact. (For example, he was chair of the failed Wheat Board.) A change gradually overtook him when he assumed responsibility for national policy, however. Kenya's *Financial Times* wrote of his term as Chief Secretary that he:

bestrode the Kenya civil service like the Shakespearean colossus. For most of that period, Nyachae's influence permeated every department of government operations and he was the most articulate exponent of most economic policies . . . He was the prime moving force behind the government's district focus for rural development programmes and its most lucid spokesman

[Kisero 1987:4].

I think that he had a major and, on balance, positive impact in this period.

Harris Mule was a quieter, less obtrusive man. Working behind the scenes he was a prime architect of Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands and District Focus programmes (the latter with Nyachae). These were progressive, redistributive programmes. He also was responsible with Philip Ndegwa, Governor of the Central Bank of Kenya, for the country's early and courageous economic readjustment in the 1980s,

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which might be thought of as a conservative policy. One international observer of Kenya's economic policies called Mule 'one of the ten best stabilisers in the world'. Both Kenyans and foreigners agree that he was exceptionally good at handling donor agencies and their pressures. Mule's internal management of the Ministry of Finance was more mixed; he was criticised for not Africanising rapidly enough and some departments were not tightly administered.

Ishmael Muriithi presided over a dramatic expansion in Kenya's veterinary services and with it the successful explosion of smallholder dairy production. His iron managerial hand turned limp however, when President Kenyatta died and the expansive public budgets on which he had relied began to run dry. His final years were not effective ones.

All of these men were responsible for important successes, but they had failures as well.² Thus the assessment of the managerial attributes of these men that follows is a subtle one, giving greater weight to those factors that are associated with the successes and steering away from those elements that seem to be responsible for their failures. Given the discriminating nature of this analysis and the brevity that is necessary to a *Bulletin* article, full proof will not always be possible for the conclusions that are drawn.

Political Connections and Organisational Autonomy

One of the older pieces of wisdom on public enterprises is that their effective management requires political autonomy. Organisations are expected to prosper to the extent that their leaderships are appointed for their technical, not their political qualifications [Hanson 1959]. It is evident from my case studies that this analysis is over simple.

Although all of my subjects were professionally well qualified for the positions that they held, their managerial success and the autonomy of their organisations was critically dependent on their political connections.³ In 1973 Charles Karanja wanted his Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA) to expand vertically into the technically difficult areas of processing and international marketing. He was opposed in this decision by the World Bank, which was KTDA's major financier, and the multinational tea corporations that were then handling these functions for the KTDA. As a consequence, the Minister of Agriculture and his Permanent Secretary decided firmly against the expansion. But Karanja would not be stopped. He sought out an interview with President Kenyatta and

asked that he be permitted to take on the new functions and to be fired if he failed. Kenyatta expressed his high regard for Karanja and gave his permission. The other actors then withdrew their opposition and the KTDA successfully assumed these new roles. This action would not have been possible if Karanja had not earlier in his career come to the personal attention of Kenyatta, inspired his confidence and had direct access to him.

The self-assurance which Karanja's presidential connections gave him also provided the KDTA with an impressive degree of autonomy, much *more* than was granted to it by its legal charter. Twice in the 1970's the Kenya Government negotiated a Tripartite Agreement whereby organised labour agreed to a freeze on wages in return for a 10 per cent increase in employment by private employers and the state. This agreement proved particularly costly to public organisations because whereas the private firms returned to their previous employment levels relatively quickly through normal attrition in their labour force, the state increased the numbers of its established positions and remained permanently fixed at the higher level. Karanja correctly felt that this agreement would be disadvantageous to the farmers whom the KTDA served, as the increased costs would have to be deducted from the payments made to them. He felt so confident of his personal standing with the President that he never implemented the Agreement, by making seasonal workers permanent. This resulted in no increase in expenditure and protected the health of his organisation from a disadvantageous political decision.

When Kenyatta died Karanja lost his direct contact with the President, but he was so confident of the importance of the KTDA and of the quality of his management that he continued to act with the same independence and decisiveness. Ultimately this cost him his position. The dénouement came during a time of high tea prices on the world market when packaged tea that Kenya subsidised for its domestic market was being smuggled to Ethiopia. A Cabinet Minister and important supporter of President Moi publicly accused the KTDA of responsibility for the smuggling and the shortage of tea in his constituency. Stung by this questioning of the KTDA's integrity, Karanja held a press conference to point out that the Minister owned the major shop in his constituency which received KTDA tea allotments, implying that if there were smuggling the Minister must be responsible for it himself. The Minister denied he was an agent for tea. As Karanja prepared to reply with documentary evidence of the Minister's role and of smuggling through Nairobi airport, he sought an audience with President Moi to brief him on the conflict. The Minister was able to keep him from seeing the President, and the Government subsequently took tea

² Mixed records are characteristic of the great American public administrators as well: see Doig and Hargrove 1987:12.

³ It turns out that this is true in the United States as well: see Doig and Hargrove 1987:15.

distribution away from the KTDA and instructed it to divert international supplies to the domestic market, at the cost of small farmers' profits.⁴ Although Karanja wasn't dismissed until some time later, his effectiveness as a manager was substantially diminished from this point. He no longer had the contacts necessary to protect his organisation.

Part of Ishmael Muriithi's job as Director of Veterinary Services was to protect Kenya's most productive beef herds from Foot and Mouth Disease so that they could be sold in the lucrative European markets. To do this, strict quarantine had to be imposed on the movement of livestock from the infected areas into disease free ones. Well placed individuals would use their influence from time to time to evade the quarantine and reap the considerable profits available from the difference in prices in the two markets. It was particularly difficult for the Veterinary Department to control the problem when people such as senior police officials were the culprits. Muriithi gained the support which he needed to win this critical struggle by going directly to President Kenyatta. He did not have personal connections himself with the President but was able to reach him and gain his confidence through Geoffrey Kariithi, who then held the powerful position of Chief Secretary and had been to high school with Muriithi. This liaison was used by the Director of Veterinary Services on a number of occasions to obtain critically needed resources and support for his department. When Kenyatta died and Kariithi retired, Muriithi was deprived of his connections with the Office of the President and was unable to protect the Veterinary Services from the conflicts and mindless budget cutting that then undermined its effectiveness. In his final years as Director he lost his characteristic vigour and decisiveness and came near to a despairing lethargy, probably only partly due to his declining health.

Harris Mule never had personal connections with those around the President and his ascension to a permanent secretaryship was delayed partly as a result. When he finally became Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Finance and Planning under President Moi, he still lacked the direct contacts necessary to obtain the economic policies he regarded as critical. He began by working through his Minister, Vice-President Mwai Kibaki, with whom he had a long-standing and close relationship. However, this became less and less effective as Kibaki's political power began to slip. Mule then allied himself informally with Simeon Nyachae in the Office of the President.

Nyachae is one of the few men to have had the personal confidence of both Presidents Kenyatta and Moi. This is probably because of Nyachae's principled

determination always to give priority to the interests of his Presidents and never to act in a way that might diminish them, even at the cost of service to his own home area. Such dogged loyalty gave both Presidents confidence in the advice that they received from Nyachae. As a consequence, on one known occasion Kisii Nyachae was even able to win a showdown with a senior Kikuyu official who was well connected with President Kenyatta.

As allies, Mule and Nyachae were able to achieve a number of important reforms through the President's trust in the latter. Most remarkable was their ability to persuade Moi to accept the politically risky conditions needed for an IMF agreement less than two months after the major coup attempt of August 1982. The great strides made under the District Focus strategy were also a direct result of the three men seeing eye to eye on the policy. On another occasion, when Mule pressed for deregulation of the grain market harder and longer than was politically expedient, it was his relationship with Nyachae and the latter's ties with the President that saved Mule from losing office.

In all of these cases we see that the ability of these public servants effectively to pursue professionally dictated policies and to protect the integrity of their organisation against inappropriate political pressures was directly contingent on their personal connections, direct or indirect, with the President. When these relationships of confidence were lost, so was their managerial effectiveness. Thus we see that the autonomy of an organisation from undue politicisation is not something that can simply be granted to it in a single constitutional act. It has to be earned and then maintained through political connections. Virtually all public organisations need favourable policy decisions and additional resources at critical junctures if they are to prosper [see Mukandala 1988; Grosh 1987]. They also need protection from unwise policy initiatives and politicisation. All of these requisites, even depoliticisation, are achieved as a consequence of political action. In Kenya and most other African states, the relevant political intervention comes from the President.

Effective public servants are able to mobilise support at critical junctures *not* by building independent political bases of support for themselves or their organisations, but from personal access to and the confidence of the President. By and large, these crucial connections were not fortuitous for the four men studied here. They resulted from loyalty and careful network building and are a tribute to their administrative astuteness in an underbureaucratized environment.⁵ Thus political considerations are important in the appointment of the most senior public servants if political autonomy and effectiveness are to be maintained.

⁵ I owe this observation to Emery Roe.

⁴ *The Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 12/4/78, p.10; 12/5/78, p.1; 12/7/78, p.4; 12/12/78, p.5. *The Nairobi Times*, 1/21/79, p.1. *The Weekly Review*, 1/26/79, pp.30-31; 2/2/79, p.24.

Professional Integrity

Not everyone who has the confidence of a president is going to use it to advance the performance of the organisation that he or she leads, however. Those who come to positions of leadership in Africa through a political career or because of their ability to mobilise support in the larger political community are not likely to be effective managers. They are likely to see their positions and the powers which they convey as a reward for the delivery of their support to the president, not as a resource to be used to advance the effectiveness of the organisation. Managers with this type of political support tend to sap, not strengthen their units.

The effective managers in our 'sample' were committed professionals. Harris Mule and Ishmael Muriithi were trained overseas respectively as a professional economist and veterinarian. Both men were deeply committed to their profession and dedicated to maintaining their standards in Kenya. Charles Karanja was trained in Uganda as a civil engineer. Such a background was quite unnecessary to the leadership of the KTDA, but it did seem to shape Karanja's ideas about public service and efficiency. In all three of these cases professional identity gave these men a strong commitment to the goals of the organisations they headed and caused them to resist their use for inappropriate personal gain by themselves or others.

Simeon Nyachae was prepared to be a provincial administrator, first by his father, Chief Nyandusi, and then by training in Kenya and England. This background gave him a very strong identification with the state and a principled determination to serve the interests of those who hold political power. In his years as a Provincial Commissioner these values did not give him a particularly strong commitment to the goals of some of the organisations with which he was involved, and he was willing to see them taxed to serve the personal interests of those who held political power over him. When he came onto the national scene, however, Nyachae increasingly came to see the interests of the 'nation', conceived in a conservative sense, as coincident with the interests of his President, the state, and the business class of which he was a part. This broadening of vision gave him a set of values which made him quite open to the policies advocated by the economist Mule.

All four men were careful to place the interests of the organisations that they served above their own pursuit of personal gain. Although their conception of what constitutes conflict of interest was more lax than those applied in the United States today, they definitely had one and adhered to it. They also differed among themselves. Muriithi's and particularly Mule's personal

ethics were the strictest, and their personal wealth upon retirement was consequently modest. Karanja and Nyachae had laxer conceptions and left the public service rich. Their wealth was due to hard work and business acumen, however, and probably only to a minor degree to the positions they had held, particularly for Karanja.

As long as they take care of their organisations well, does it interfere with their effectiveness if public managers use their positions to advance their personal wealth in Africa? I have concluded that the answer is yes. Certainly the general political and social environment of which these men were part was quite unconcerned about corruption, and effectively encouraged it. In much the same way as Robert Price demonstrated for Ghana [Price 1975], the question in the popular mind was never how someone got their wealth but whether they were personally transferring resources to their relatives and home areas. My interviews revealed, however, that a different set of values usually prevailed *inside* public agencies among the professional subordinates and peers of the managers I studied. The respect and support that a manager of a professional organisation received from his subordinates and from his peers in related organisations appeared to be heavily contingent on his perceived personal integrity. This does not mean that these subordinates and peers were always behaving with integrity themselves. Unlike members of the general public, however, they understood the concept of conflict of interest and felt that they owed effort and support to those who were faithful to it, even if they were not. Conversely, they felt free to be slack in their duties if they were asked to do something by someone whose integrity they doubted. I am not suggesting that Kenyan professionals always — or even usually — practise what they preach, but they do believe what they preach. Their views on integrity have something of the same status as American views on marital fidelity in presidential politics. Even those who do not practise the ethical code themselves believe that those who break it do not deserve to hold leadership positions. Thus in Kenya, those whose integrity is in doubt are unlikely to be effective managers of professional organisations. Indeed, the decline in the careers of two of the managers in our 'sample' can be traced in part to revelations that they had profited from minor conflicts of interest.

I have carefully limited the above generalisation about the relationship between integrity and managerial effectiveness to professional organisations. Interviews with Simeon Nyachae's colleagues in the Provincial Administration did not reveal much concern with the conflict of interest issue. Quite possibly this part of the Kenya Government is so closely tied to the regulation and practice of politics that it has no distinct professional code of ethics on such matters.

Access to Donor Resources

Another attribute that proved critical to managerial effectiveness was the ability to inspire the confidence of international actors. African economies are relatively small and weak, and international markets and donor transfers are unusually important to them. Those managers who are skilled at acquiring these resources are able to use them to gain flexibility in an environment that is usually severely constrained. They also perform a function for the economy that gives them support from other powerful domestic politicians and public servants.

Harris Mule was particularly well known for his skill with donors; this attribute was independently raised by eight quite different interviewees. It is interesting that whereas the foreigners tended to say that Mule 'gets along well with donors', one of the Kenyan respondents said that 'he *handles* donors well', a subtle but significant difference in perspective. Mule was helpful in international economic negotiations because he both understood donor objectives and was able to make them in turn understand Kenyan political constraints. Thus he was invaluable in advancing some of the reforms that donors regarded as important and in getting them to accept that others were unachievable at the time. In this way he was crucial to obtaining IMF, World Bank and bilateral donor resources at critical junctures for the economy. Mule's skill in this regard was immensely aided by and may well have depended on his reputation for professionalism and absolute personal integrity, which made donors trust what he said. One donor even funded a project in Mule's home area to reward him for being incorruptible and thus unable to finance any significant projects himself.

Ishmael Muriithi's professional reputation was similarly responsible for inspiring international confidence in Kenya and thus bringing it advantage. In his case the critical problem was gaining access to the lucrative European beef market, despite the continued presence in Kenya of animal diseases such as Foot and Mouth. European states usually prohibit the import of fresh beef from any country in which these diseases are identified. Kenya gained access to some of the European market by arguing that it would export beef only from zones which were kept free of the offending diseases. For European veterinary officials to accept this argument they had to be convinced that Kenya would indeed enforce a rigid quarantine on cattle movements into these zones, and that only beef that came from these zones would be cleared for export to Europe. To be so persuaded they had to have confidence in the high standards and integrity of Kenya's Veterinary Service. Muriithi's reputation as Director for being incorruptible and firmly committed to professional standards created

that international confidence. In a similar way, the high regard with which he was held in international veterinary circles helped him to bring the International Laboratory for Research on Animal Diseases' and other, even more direct forms of donor assistance, to Kenya.

Charles Karanja's reputation for efficient management of the Kenya Tea Development Authority facilitated its continued access to substantial amounts of assistance, particularly from the World Bank, and thus gave it the resources and flexibility to grow beyond what Kenya's domestic capital constraints would have allowed.⁶ The KTDA's size and international reputation in turn gave Karanja weight in many domestic policy struggles.

The only one of our four who was not particularly gifted with the international community was Simeon Nyachae. As a Provincial Commissioner, Nyachae had been one of President Kenyatta's primary instruments for the control of domestic politics [see Gertzel 1970]. When Nyachae came to the national policy scene he had very little international experience and was tainted by his past political connections. He and the donors didn't understand each other very well, and they were not certain that they could trust him. It was here that Nyachae's alliance with Mule was of such great importance; just as Nyachae provided Mule with political connections, Mule provided donor access to Nyachae.

Africanisation

Frequently there was a down side to donor confidence, one that reduced the loyalty that managers inspired in their own staff. Three of the managers in our 'sample' felt that they had to use some non-Kenyan staff in order to maintain high professional standards in their organisations, standards which gave them a strong international reputation. The morale and allegiance of their Kenyan staff depended, however, on a vigorous Africanisation programme, replacing foreign with local staff.

Only Charles Karanja handled this dilemma well. He concentrated expatriate staff in training positions and in those parts of the organisation where new functions were being added. He was able to rally nationalist sentiment for his personnel policies, despite the continued use of foreigners, by externalising the conflict. He argued that the important issue was not the exact distribution of positions inside the organisation but whether it would be the Kenyan-

⁶ The KTDA's access to Bank funds was *aided* by, but was not *dependent* on Karanja's management. As Rwekaza Mukandala has pointed out to me, other, less well managed tea authorities were getting Bank monies at this time. Of course the popularity of tea as a target of lending was due in large part to the KTDA's success, which in turn was influenced by Karanja.

controlled KTDA or the multinational corporations that would control critical aspects of the domestic tea industry. For the technically demanding role of factory manager, he was able to point out that the multinationals did not believe it was possible for any Kenyan African to do the job in the near future. Thus when he hired an expatriate to head the factory division and to train managers, he could argue that he was promoting, not hindering Africanisation, and in the process was able to unleash a nationalist determination among his recruits to do their jobs well and prove the multinationals wrong.

Ishmael Muriithi was not so adept. He was under great pressure to replace expatriate veterinarians with Kenyan ones as they became available. He argued that this was a non-issue. As the country had a shortage of vets anyway, both should be employed. But he also felt that his highest priority was to assign African vets to field positions, where they would be able to interact with African livestock producers. This meant that he was seen as keeping expatriates in the highly prized headquarters positions. Consequently he developed a reputation among his Kenyan staff for being insufficiently attentive to their advancement, and lost some of their loyalty. This was tragic, for the circumstances actually closely parallel those in the KTDA where Karanja was able to engender the extra incentive of nationalist competition. The measure of an 'Africaniser' may be as much subjective as objective. The manager who is able to give reality to an external promotion standard that he is *helping* his staff to meet will out-perform one who is seen as being the gate keeper himself.

Harris Mule also had trouble with Africanisation, a problem which he inherited from his predecessor, Philip Ndegwa. In Finance and Planning the replacement of expatriates with locals in line positions took place relatively rapidly, perhaps too rapidly. For it was then felt that certain critical skills were still in short supply, and foreign advisors were brought in to provide them. Mule's Kenyan subordinates frequently resented the influence that some of these advisors had, and the fact that they often seemed to get the more challenging work. There was something of a vicious circle here, for as Kenyans grew discontented with foreign advisors they sometimes became more lax in their own work and the need for expatriates increased. Something like Karanja's device for making this competition functional rather than destructive was needed.

Risk Taking

A further attribute that emerges from our case studies is the willingness to take risks. All four men occasionally faced circumstances in which they had to put their own careers at stake by taking decisions or

advocating policies which were critical to their organisations. Karanja, Mule, and Nyachae were willing to do so when they calculated that the political odds gave them some chance of success, and they usually won. Muriithi was a more classically 'conservative' bureaucrat, however, and his organisation may have suffered at some critical junctures as a result.

It is interesting to ask why these three managers were willing to risk their careers. Karanja and Nyachae both said that it was because they were already well to do and had always intended to make their careers in private business rather than the public sector anyway. Mule had always been dedicated to a public career and his personal property was quite modest, but he too felt that his earning opportunities did not depend on his continued government service. Since he had been incorruptible, he could make more as a private or international executive. Although I think that all three men, in different ways, loved the exercise of power, that love did not outweigh their drive to accomplish certain goals that they had set for their organisations, and they felt that they had the financial independence to take that risk. Business or other executive positions awaited them outside the public sector.

Paradoxically the fact that the Kenyan state does not have a monopoly control over higher income earning positions therefore seems to have given it better service from its managers by making them less risk averse. Muriithi's unwillingness to take the same risks as the other three men may have been due to the extremely limited possibilities for private veterinary practice in Kenya which his own policies had helped to create.⁷

Drive

Finally and unsurprisingly, all four men had extraordinary drive and an ability for hard work that was sometimes of legendary proportions. They worked exceedingly long hours and were extremely self-disciplined. Mule read voraciously and into the early hours of every morning. Nyachae began his day early, worked through lunch, and kept to a rigid schedule of exercise. He was famous for the speed with which he gave written replies to memos. All four were unusual in being extremely temperate in their drinking, although Mule loved bars as a young man; Nyachae believed in total abstinence from alcohol and would not even drink coffee.

Conclusion

'Type A' personality attributes are a common part of the folk-lore of executive success everywhere. People

⁷ As Emery Roe has pointed out to me, these observations indicate that the brain drain from the public to the private sector in Kenya at least has some compensating advantages.

with exceptional careers are usually exceptional. Of greater interest are the attributes of political connections, professional competence and integrity, access to donor resources, and skill at maintaining staff quality and commitment through the trials of Africanisation. We see that these attributes have a distinctively African character that is consistent with the universal tenets of organisation and social exchange theories, but which could not have been easily predicted from them. Much more work is needed on this fascinating and important topic. I will have more to say as I continue my analysis of my case studies, and I hope that others will join me in research in this area as well.

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