

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP CONSTRUCT AND NIGERIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Apart from common leadership styles, several modern leadership styles and approaches exist. Strategic leadership is among the modern leadership approaches that is gaining more ground in Nigeria. This leadership style that hitherto was only popular in for profit organizations has in recent years, become a model for transforming public non-profit organizations across the globe. This trend is also glaring in Nigeria, where tertiary institutions, hospitals and other public organizations are now yearning for strategic leaders in order to turn things around. This paper x-rayed this popular and novel construct by depicting how the variable can play essential roles toward organizational strategies implementation and overall organizational development.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, Public institutions, Strategic leadership dimensions, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Quite a number of different definitions of strategic leadership are available in the extant literature. One of them is that of Finkelstein (2009, p.4) that focuses on “executives who have overall responsibility for an organization, their characteristics, what they do, how they do it, and particularly, how they affect organizational outcomes”. Another definition by Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson, (2007 p.375) is “the leader’s ability to anticipate, envision, and maintain flexibility and to empower others to create strategic change as necessary”. The first definition by Finkelstein (2009) emphasized on ‘process’. While Hitt *et al* (2007) gives more emphasis on ‘behaviour’ that strategic leaders should possess. These are the categorization of strategic leadership construct (Guohui, & Eppler, 2016).

On the other hand, looking at various definitions of strategic leadership critically, one can categorize them into two. The first category based its definition of strategic leaders on the ‘functions’ the strategic leaders performed (c.f. Hilt, *et al.* 2007; Hughes & Beathy, 2005; Ireland & Hilt, 1999;

Granados, 2011); while the second conceptualization of strategic leadership was based on ‘behaviours’ that strategic leaders ought to possess (c.f. Boal, 2011; Elenkov *et al* 2005; Grandy, 2013; Kasim, 2010). Taken it together, all the definitions give more emphasis on the relational aspect in terms of both strategic as well as symbolic activities (Cannella, 2001); and emphasis was given based on the single-actor or hero leader (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Kriger & Zhovtobryukh, 2013).

Dimensions of Strategic Leadership Construct

A comprehensive review of the literature on strategic leadership suggests that it is both a unidimensional and multidimensional construct. For instance, House, Dorfman, Javida, Hanges and de Luque, (2013) as well as Hitt, Haynes and Serpa, (2010) suggest that strategic leadership is a unidimensional construct with leadership traits like being visionary, inspirational, having integrity etc. Other studies indicated that the variable is a multidimensional construct consisting of at least three to four dimensions (Hughes & Beathy, 2005; Boal, 2001; Grandy, 2011; Granados & Kruse, 2011; Stumpf & Mullen, 1991). While other conceptualizations

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depict the variable in five dimensions (Hitt *et al.*, 2007; Eacoht, 2010; Devies, 2003; Shoemaker & Krupp, 2015; Nicholls, 1994). And others with six and seven dimensions (Neumann & Neumann, 1999; Elenkov *et al.*, 2005; Ireland & Hilt, 1999), and lastly the ones with nine dimensions (Hitt, *et al.*, 1999).

For the benefit of Nigerian public non-profit oriented organizations, this paper proposed a strategic leadership construct as one-dimensional construct (House *et al.*, 2013; Hitt *et al.*, 2010). But, contrary to the previous studies, this study widened the definition of the construct to encompass the chief executive, the divisional managers/heads as well as sectional heads. This was done on the belief that a well-implemented strategy should encompass all employees on all hierarchical levels of the organization (Engberg, Hörte, & Lundbäck, 2015; Ketunen, 2009). Sila and Gichinga, (2016) posited that without a middle manager there would be a fissure between the strategic apex and the operational core, and hence, it would be more or less impossible to execute strategies. Therefore, in this study, strategic leadership is viewed as being concerned with the leadership “of” organizations, instead of “in” organizations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000, Özer, and Tinaztepe, 2014).

Re-conceptualization of strategic leadership by this paper is very essential since as mentioned above, most available leadership theories are based on the single-actor or hero leader (Kriger & Zhovtobryukh, 2013). This notion seems to be erroneous especially in the context of Nigerian public organizations. By and large, the conceptualization is extending the thinking on strategic leadership that consists of networks of actors; an approach that has something to do with distributed leadership (Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce *et al.*, 2008; Gronn, 2002; Mehra *et al.*, 2006; Day *et al.*, 2004; Spillane, 2006). Strategic leadership is versatile as it entails managing through subordinates and assists the organization to cope with changes that

seem to be increasing dramatically in today’s globalized business environment (Huey 1994). Strategic leadership demands the capability and ability to incorporate both the inside and outside business environment of the organization, and engage in multifaceted information processing. Several identifiable actions and features are essential for strategic leaders as postulated by Hitt *et al.* (2007). These qualities contribute positively to effective strategy execution.

- i. Identifying the strategic direction to follow
- ii. Setting and establishing standard organisational controls
- iii. Managing organisational resources effectively
- iv. Maintaining an effective organizational culture
- v. Emphasising on ethical practice

Strategic leaders play a significant role to play in all the afore-mentioned strategic actions. Consequently, all the above strategic actions contribute positively to organizational effective strategy execution. Hence and Glantz (2002) stress the need for organizations to find an appropriate leadership style. This is very true especially when it comes to the implementation of important and daunting managerial techniques like strategy that is more about change. Bringing about change, especially in public nonprofit oriented organization in Nigeria, is not an easy task because the institutions are characterized by vagueness in their mission.

Essentiality of Strategic Leaders in Nigerian Public Organizations

“Leadership helps and enables followers to remain focused on objectives” (Leichtling, 2000, p28; Melilli, 2000, p,8; Schultz, 2000, p. 94). The efficacy of strategic leaders in directing and influencing others is seen in improved outputs. Again, the role of strategic leadership in strategy implementation could not be overemphasized. Strategic leadership could be defined as “the leader’s ability to

anticipate, envision, and maintain flexibility and to empower others to create strategic change as necessary” (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson 2007 p. 375). Strategic leadership is multifaceted activity that involves managing through others, and assists organizations to cope with change that appears to be dramatically increasing in today’s global business environment (Huey, 1994). Strategic leadership requires the ability to embrace and integrate both the external and internal business environment of an organization, and to engage and manage composite information processing. Strategic leaders are a synergistic blending of managerial and visionary leadership styles (Lear, 2012).

Ireland and Hitt (1999) posited that economy globally has created a new competitive environment in which things are constantly changing unpredictably. Revolutionary changes happen quickly, constantly, and affect virtually all segments of an organization simultaneously (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). These developments require organizations revolutionize their leadership style to strategic leadership in order to increase the speed of the decision-making through which strategies are formulated and executed (Kessler & Chakrabarti, 1999). The contemporary global economy is built on knowledge. Thus, in the 21st century, the organization’s ability to build, share and leverage knowledge will mostly replace ownership and/or control of tangible assets as a primary source of competitive advantage (Lear, 2012). In the 21st-century knowledge based economy, competition will be multifaceted, tough and burdened with competitive opportunities and threats (Drucker, Dyson, Handy, Saffo, & Senge, 1997). Thus, Gibney, Copeland and Murie (2009) confirmed that a style of leadership that is rooted in knowledge is the leadership style for the emerging knowledge-based economy.

An investigation into the extant literature in the area of strategic leadership indicated that an increasing interest in the topic

(Oyedijo, 2012). Despite the long history of studies on leadership, scholars have just lately started to figure out strategic leadership as a centre of attention (Boal & Schultz, 2007). For all this while, the practice of “strategic leadership” appears to be animated by constant myths, at times created by the trade press, and at other times by the individual experience of leaders. These “myths” deserve critical scholarly enquiry (Narayanan & Zane, 2009).

Several studies have shown the positive correlation between strategic leadership and organizational development in many organizations both for profit and public organizations. Jooste and Fourie (2009) investigated the role of different dimensions of strategic leadership in strategy execution in South African listed firms using a mail questionnaire. The respondents were asked to rank their perception on the extent to which specific strategic leadership actions add positively to effective strategy execution in their organizations. A five-point Likert scale was used. The respondents viewed that the determination of a strategic direction for an organization as one of the strategic leadership actions plays the most significant role in effective strategy executions. Other strategic leadership roles that also played a key role in organizational development are the development of human capital and exploitation and safeguarding of core competence. Measurement tools couple with leadership has strengthened SMEs in South Africa as shown by research conducted by Ladzami, Smith and Pretorius (2012). Again, Alkhadi, Asulay and Dixon (2013) investigated the main pressing factors that determined strategy execution in Saudi Arabian banks and found that leadership plays the most significant role.

On the other hand, the role of strategic leaders toward the execution of institutional strategic plans and public organizations development is very glaring. Shah and Nair (2014) researched strategy

implementation in Australian universities. They argued that leadership that aligned itself with institutional resources led to successful execution. Ng'ang'a (2013) conducted a research on the implementation of strategic plans in selected schools in Kenya. The outcome of the study revealed that leadership is the arrowhead toward the successful execution of strategies in those schools. Fuller (2012) studied the Leader's Role in Strategic Implementation at Liverpool University. He administered questionnaire to 197 respondents who made the sample population for the research. Factors like developing vision and mission, setting objectives and goals, strategy formulation, implementation of the strategy, as well as evaluating performances scored strongly on the scale of measure. This indicates that strategic leadership is cardinal in the success of a strategies tertiary institution. Moreover, Omboi, (2011) conducted a study using survey in Meru Central District of Kenya on selected public tertiary institutions. Using population that made up of 136 lecturers, 30 heads of departments and 12 top managers, the study suggested that weak influence of managerial behaviours was because of the Management strategic thinking. He argued that organizational leaders co-opting the subordinates like the faculty members would lead to effective strategy implementation. Kalali, Anvari, Asghar and Karimay (2011) posited that failure of strategic implementation in institutions of higher learning in Iraq today comprised of sixteen factors of which leadership role count to 71%. They further lamented that without proper leadership, tertiary institutions in Iraq will continue without having vision, mission, work ethics, and good strategies, adequate resources, better structures, well defined culture and many others. Another study was conducted in five (5) Iranian universities, offering degrees in medicine by Abdulwahid *et.al* (2013) investigating the factors that cause the failure of strategic plans implementation in public health sectors. The study argued that leadership role is

important in crafting and in strategic plans execution; and if the strategic leader did not partner the subordinates in the strategy implementation, the leadership will not be able to create a brilliant vision for any meaningful strategic program. Mapetere (2012) concurred that besides vision creation, leadership in an organization helps to identify the relevant resources like the proper men and women for the strategy stride, promote proper desired organizational cultures and host of others.

Role of Strategic Leaders in Organizational Development and Execution of Organizational Strategies

Leadership in general and Strategic leadership, in particular, is widely regarded by numerous scholars as one of the key elements for effective organizational development (Akbarpour Shirazi, & Lashkar Blooki, 2014; Bossidy&Charan 2002; Cocks, 2010; Collins 2001; De Feo, & Janssen, 2001; Coulson-Thomas, 2013; Lynch 2006; Freedman &Tregoe 2003; Noble 1999; Thompson & Strickland 2003; Kaplan & Norton 2004; Pearce & Robinson 2007; Hrebiniak 2005; Johanns dottir, Olafsson, & Davidsdottir, 2015). On the other hand, lack of leadership, specifically strategic leadership in an organization, has been penciled as one of the major obstacles to effective strategy execution (Alexander 1985; Beer & Eisenstat 2000; Kaplan & Norton 2004; Hrebiniak 2005; Latif, Gohar, Hussain, &Kashif, 2013; Mapetere, Mavhiki, Nyamwanza, Sikomwe & Mhonde, 2012).

Strategic leaders at all levels of organization play several and tremendous roles in the implementation of organizational strategies. Cater and Pucko (2010) opined that while a good crafted strategy, coupled with strong and effective and abundant skills, combined with human capital are exceptionally important resources for strategy success, poor leadership is one of the major hurdles that effective strategy execution. Lorange (1998) posited that the chief executive officer (CEO) and other top management must highlight the various interfaces within the organization. One

important challenge in successful organizational strategy executions is ensuring employees 'buy-in', channeling their capabilities, and understanding toward the new invented strategy. As a result, the availability of effective and strategic leadership outweighs any other factor (Rajasekar, 2014). Mullins (2005) confirmed that several managerial problems have to do with psychological, physical, economic and social aspects. By putting together, a team of managers from different settings, new and advanced approaches to old problems are often obtained. The scientific mind from each field attempted to bring out the essence of the problem and relate it structure to other similar problems.

Taylor (1995) opined that to have all employees attaining the required comprehending the organization's vision and goals, as well as providing commitment and involve actively in translating the organization's strategic plans into implementable activities, strong and decisive leadership is indeed required to drive the course. He then concludes that strategic leaders handle radical change to achieve serious improvement in organizational performance. These kinds of leaders communicate both internally and externally with an open management style, trying to put in place a new culture in which employees will feel involved and accommodated. In their submission, Thompson and Strickland (2007) concurred on this view by heralding that strategic leaders maintain organizational creativity by taking special plans that promote, nourish and support employees who are ready to champion new ideas, better services, new products and product applications.

In his research titled 'Effect of selected variables on corporate performance', Awino (2007) said that for a strategy to be successfully executed, a dedicated leadership must champion it. He then declared that any corporate agenda would only be a successful plan if the analysis and

commitment should come from the corporate office headed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and supporting team members have a holistic view of the organization and its environment. Accordingly, it is the Chief Executive and his management team who shape and have the ultimate responsibility for achieving the strategic yearnings of the organization resource allocation, processes, and the organization's intended strategy. Beer and Eisenstat (2000) argued that poor coordination across functions and poor down-the-line leadership skills and development are killers of strategy execution. Enhancing communication within the tertiary institutions of learning plays a vital role in organizational strategy implementation. According to Beer and Eisenstat (2000), blocked vertical communication has a harmful effect on an organization's ability to implement and refine its strategy. Similarly, Foreman and Argenti (2005) investigated the relationship between an organization's corporate communication functions and its strategy execution. The outcome of their research revealed that in good strategy execution, CEOs focus on branding and reputation and emphasizes internal communication. Coordination of organizational activities, streamlining of processes, couple with aligning the organizational structure, and keeping employees motivated and committed to strategy execution are key responsibilities of strategic leaders.

The Chief Executive and his top management members need to spend a lot of time understanding implications associated with changes in their area of operation and the organization general environment as well and then map out a plan that will lead to effective implementation of the strategic plan that will suit the new situation. The involvement of the top management goes beyond the strategic planning stage to include the actual execution process by which the planned strategies are accomplished. According to Curtin (1999), strategic leadership encompasses

encouraging workers to perform better through communicating the value of stretched targets and providing a chance for individual and team contributions.

Lufthans (1992) suggested that leaders in any organization should show commitment, share the organization's vision, and involve employees in the process of strategy execution while listening to a mixture of possibilities. If the leaders and workers share the same values and internalize these values, the relationship between leader and employee will be strong in all situations and consequently leading to free circulation of organizational communication that will facilitate knowledge transfer. This leads to the opinion that says an effective leader has to focus on culture of the organization and influence every individual to individually focus on the organization's vision. Leader's commitment is the most obvious managerial practices that directly affect the success of the organization (Hammer & Stanton, 1995; Holland & Kumar, 1995; Guimaraes & Bond, 1996). Top management commitment contributes positively to the successful strategy implementation in public tertiary institutions. A lack of commitment to the implementation process in an organization may result in insufficient resources that affect the execution processes. Even though effective strategy implementation is agreed to be associated with good organizational performance, organizational leadership could influence the realization of expected results. Leaders should orient their subordinates in the same direction. Chief executives should be at the forefront in providing vision, initiative, motivation and inspiration (Ombina, Omoni & Sipili, 2010).

Mintzberg (2004) is of the view that a good strategy execution plan depends on the learning and environment development for staff that is the true foot soldiers for the implementation. This environment for learning orientation demands emphasis on collaboration, openness, equity, trust, continuous enhancement and risk taking. In

order to accomplish this, there has to be an adaptation to changing environmental conditions feasible under fine leadership that ensure clear communication to subordinates with confidence and endorsement from the stakeholders. Nowadays, tertiary institutions are experiencing rigid competition for limited funding from both in and outside the country. This is pushing them to explore how management styles would affect implementation of their strategic plans, which is expected to assist them in achieving competitive advantage and remain credible to continue accessing donor's funds (Abok 2013). Implementation of organizational strategy is a persistent theme in both strategic management and organizational skills.

Additionally, Grandy (2013) in his work titled 'an exploratory study of strategic leadership in churches' which was carried out on a Canadian church using qualitative techniques for data collection suggested that over the past several years, the Church and its members have experienced a number of incremental as well as more radical changes. Much of these changes were attributed to the vision and leadership style of the Church leader. Four strategic behaviours displayed by the leader lead to the changes. These behaviours are unsettlingly with the status quo, shared leadership, shared vision and culture of community and organizational learning. Omboi, (2011) conducted a study using survey in Meru Central District of Kenya on selected public tertiary institutions using population that made up of 136 lecturers, 30 heads of departments and 12 top managers. The study suggested that weak influence of managerial behaviours was because of the Management strategic thinking. He argued that organizational leaders co-opting the subordinates like the faculty members would lead to effective strategy implementation.

Similarly, Sila and Gichinga (2016) carried out a study on the impact of strategic leadership on the performance of public

universities in Kenya. The quantitative research that administered survey to 98 respondents that include Deans, Head of Departments and other stakeholders within JKUAT University found that strategic leadership plays a crucial role in effective strategy implementation in the institution. It is then recommended that strategic leadership in public tertiary institutions should be biased towards strategy implementation. In their study conducted in an Indonesian higher education institution, Hidayat et al. (2015) showed that the three dimensions of strategic leadership they tested give reasonable contribution to strategy implementation in the institution. The dimensions are strategic expert (strategist), change agent, and visionary leadership. The study consisted of 67 respondents from different strata in the sampled institutions. On his own part, Kalaliet. (2011) argued that failure of strategy implementation in institutions of higher learning in Iraq today comprises of sixteen factors of which leadership role count to 71%. He further lamented that without proper leadership, tertiary institutions in Iraq will continue without having vision, mission, work ethics, and good strategies, adequate resources, better structures, well defined culture and many others. In another study conducted in five (5) Iranian universities, offering degrees in medicine by Abdulwahid *et. al* (2013) investigating the factors that cause the failure of strategic plan implementation in public health sectors. The study argued that the leadership role is important in crafting and in strategic plan execution; and if the strategic leader did not partner the subordinates in the strategy implementation, the leadership will not be able to create a brilliant vision for any meaningful strategic program.

Subjective Measures for Strategic Leadership Construct

Strategic leadership is defined as “the leader’s ability to anticipate, envision, and maintain flexibility and to empower others to create strategic change as necessary” (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson 2007 p. 375).

The measurement for this construct could be done using the methodological approach presented by Baum, Locke and Kirkpatrick (1998) in collaboration with Bass and Avolio’s (1992) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) – Form 6S. The MLQ questionnaire was found to be among the best instruments as well as one of the most utilized set of measures for all leadership researches (Lowe & Galen, 1996). The MLQ instruments consist of three broad segments that represent transformational, transactional and laissez- faire leadership behaviours. However, the laissez-faire leadership behaviour segment in the MLQ questionnaire should not be used in measuring strategic leadership variable, because as argued Elenkov, Judge and Wright (2005), laissez-faire leadership behaviours defy the very essence of strategic leadership. Thus, sixteen (16) items could be adapted from the MLQ. The visionary aspect of strategic leadership could be measured using three (3) essential attributes proposed by House (1998). These items include traits like leadership brevity and clarity. Traits similar to these were used in one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of visionary leadership and found to have significant relationship with organizational effectiveness (Baum *et al.*, 1998). Extant literature suggested that several empirical studies have used the MLQ to measure different leadership behaviours (e.g. Alsayed, Motaghi& Osman., 2012; Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Berson, Shamir, Avolio & Popper, 2001; Geyery, & Steyrer, 1998; Rowold, & Heinitz, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

From the above, we can discern that strategic leaders play a significant role in organizational progress and development both in private and public sectors through the aforementioned roles they played through their strategic actions. Consequently, all the above strategic actions contribute positively to overall organizational development. Hence and Glantz (2002) stressed the need for organizations to find an appropriate

leadership style. This is very true especially in the present competitive world of today because strategic leaders are known of spearheading daunting managerial task change'. Bringing about change, in any organization, is not an easy task because generally human beings are allergic to change.

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