

SMES AND BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

Godfrey Mwamba Tshibangu

Lecturer, School of Business and Economics, Africa International University

Email: tsmwamba@yahoo.com

Abstract

A portion of literature on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and leadership in Africa has revealed that most organisational leaders in Africa work in SMEs while the mortality rate of SMEs among African countries remains very high with five out of seven new businesses failing in their first year. Effective leadership is a key predictor of organisational success or failure and creates an environment conducive to performance improvement. The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework that will enable organisational leaders to identify challenges that are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa and suggest ways of overcoming those challenges. The findings show that the most problematic barriers to successful SMEs include: lack of strategic management skills, a written vision, and core values. The leaders often allocate resources, giving priority to their personal (or culturally induced) goals rather than overall organisational goals; they use a directive leadership style and fail to treat organisational goals with importance. Additionally, the study depicts a wrong perception of the subordinates towards their leaders rooted in African cultural values that considers a leader or manager who often seeks the opinion of his subordinates as being weak and incapable. Environmental influences such as negative cultural and socio-economic conditions in Africa play a direct or indirect role in leadership performance. This paper suggests effective ways of addressing these challenges thus: African organisational leaders to be equipped with strategic management skills and technical skills, leaders to empower the employees to act with confidence, encouraging independent thinking and creativity. Training of African organisational leaders in transformational leadership skills and hiring more candidates who exhibit transformational leadership qualities. Organisational leaders can influence the culture positively with behaviours such as articulating a compelling vision or leading by example.

Keywords: SMEs, effective leadership, leadership in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the organisational leaders in Africa are working in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (The World Bank, 2017; Mwobobia, 2012). Unfortunately, the review of literature conducted by Muriithi (2017) revealed that the mortality rate of SMEs among African countries remains very high with five out of seven new businesses failing in their first year. For instance, in Uganda, one-third of the new business start-ups do not last beyond one year of operation, while in South Africa, the failure rate is between 50% and 95% depending on the industry (Willemse, 2010; World Bank, 2012 as cited in Muriithi, 2017). The study conducted by Kadete (2014) in Tanzania revealed that most of those who run SMEs lack formal skills in running enterprises that fail in business or misuse of funds by channeling the borrowed capital to consumption. Leadership effectiveness is considered when individuals in a position of leadership can impact the groups to perform their roles with positive organisational outcomes. Leaders, as the key decision-makers, determine the acquisition, development, and deployment of organisational resources, the conversion of these resources into valuable products and services, and the delivery of value to organisational stakeholders (Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin & Taherdoost, 2016).

To survive and prosper, African organisations need leaders who are flexible and adaptive. These leaders must be able to understand the complex relationships among performance determinants and recognise what can be done to influence them beneficially. African managers need to be prepared to modify their leadership behaviour, the competitive strategy, and the formal programmes and structures to meet the challenges that confront them in an increasingly turbulent and uncertain environment (adapted from Yukl, 2008). Leadership is the process of influencing and inspiring others to work to achieve a common goal and then giving them the power and the freedom to achieve it (Scarborough, 2012). Leadership effectiveness is considered when individuals in a position of leadership can impact the groups to perform their roles with positive organisational outcomes. The most common measures used to evaluate an effective leader are examining the consequences of the leader's actions, for instance, if

a leader can influence his subordinates in such a way that positive outcomes are realised. This constitutes an effective leadership style (Yukl, 2010). Nahavandi (2012) suggested three elements of leadership effectiveness according to which a leader is effective when his or her followers achieve their goals, can function well together, and can adapt to the changing demands from external forces. Therefore, effective leadership is a key predictor of organisational success or failure, and effective leadership can facilitate performance development. Effective leaders create an environment conducive to performance improvement by positively influencing the behaviors and thus the performance of workers (Kapucu, Volkov & Wang, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework that will enable African organisational leaders to identify challenges that are likely to hinder the process of providing effective leadership and suggest effective ways of overcoming the barriers to effective leadership in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based upon a review of theories, research findings and reports gathered from relevant literature. It is guided by the following questions: 1) What challenges are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa? 2) What are effective ways of addressing the challenges that are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa?

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the following theories of leadership effectiveness:

- i. The leadership skills approach suggests that knowledge and abilities are needed for effective leadership. To identify challenges which are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa, the study relied mainly on the comprehensive skill-based model of leadership which has five components: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences (Northouse, 2016).
- ii. Given that most of the organisational leaders in Africa are working in SMEs in which the rate of failure remains very high with employees at different levels, this requires the situational leadership theory (SLT). According to this theory, for leaders to be effective, they must determine where followers are on the developmental continuum and adapt their leadership styles so they directly match their style to that development level. This approach stresses that leaders need to find out about their followers' needs and then adapt their leadership style accordingly (Northouse, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research work conducted by Bulley, Osei-Bonsu and Rasaan (2017) revealed that the work environment within which the leader operates is also considered a major motivator for hard work and effective leadership. The findings from the LEAD research project in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania suggest both similarities and differences in perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Participants from the three countries describe effective leaders as people who are visionary, goal-oriented, and results-oriented (Galperin, Melyoki, Senaji, Mukanzi & Michaud, 2017).

The findings in the study conducted by Toor and Ogunlana (2009) revealed that negative personal attributes (such as wrongful use of power, as well as organizational impediments or neutralizers (such as lack of resources, lack of planning and control, lack of strategic management, lack of top management support, etc.), can be detrimental to the effectiveness of leadership. According to their study, the effectiveness of leadership depends largely on personal attributes of the leader, the readiness of their followers, and various environmental factors (such as the characteristics of the organization, the socio-economic and cultural variables among others). Therefore, the paper is organised according to the following framework: attributes of the leader, the readiness of their followers, and various environmental factors.

Negative Personal Attributes of Leaders

The review of literature conducted by Toor and Ogunlana (2009) has revealed that several negative personality traits such as lack of appropriate management skills, failing to build teams, being unable to think strategically and spending more time occupied with matters other than their work assignments lead to ineffective leadership. In addition, being insensitive, cold, and arrogant and maintaining poor relations with staff leads to ineffectual leadership.

In 2014, Kadete conducted a study that showed that many of those who run SMEs in Africa lack formal skills or appropriate management skills in running enterprises that fail. More so, they are likely to engage in some personal behaviours that lead to ineffective leadership, in general, which may include preparing business plans just for external validation by banks and creditors rather than for coordinating organizational activities (Temtime, 2002 as cited in Pansiri & Temtime, 2008). Bulley et al. (2017) conducted a study that demonstrated that in Africa, some organisational leaders were sometimes not confident enough to point out mistakes or sanction subordinates. This means that they are providing leadership without management control. According to the observation made by Montgomery (1987 as cited in Kuada, 2010) African executives in Southern African countries failed to treat organisational goals with the importance that these goals deserve and were frequently engaged in the search for personal power and privileges. This is a clear indication of a lack of visionary leadership and it is a big challenge that is likely to hinder the process of providing effective organisational leadership.

The Readiness of Followers

If a leader's followers are highly competent, they will improve the group's problem-solving abilities and performance. Similarly, if a task is particularly complex or a group's communication is poor, the leader's performance will be affected (Northouse, 2016). Therefore, effective leaders empower the employees to act with confidence and courage. When all these elements are in place, employees produce results and organizations prosper (Scarborough, 2012). Unfortunately, African employees see an ideal leader as someone who must instruct them (Zoogah & Beugré, 2013 as cited in Bulley, Osei-Bonsu & Rasaan, 2017). Consequently, they tend to be inspected (i.e. closely supervised) rather than expected (i.e. motivated) in an age when other societies advocate for and practice employee empowerment and encourage independent thinking and creativity that ensures organisational agility (Kuada, 2010).

General Characteristics of SMEs

There is no universally accepted definition of an SME. The definitions used vary widely among countries but are usually based on employment. In general, an SME is considered to have fewer than 500 employees, although many countries use a lower cut-off, such as 300 or even 100 employees. The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) makes the following distinction: micro-companies (one to four employees), very small companies (five to 19 employees), small companies (20-99 employees) and medium-sized companies (100-500 employees). The EU defines SMEs as having fewer than 250 employees (drawn from The Scottish Office Statistical Bulletin Index 1998 by Lange et al., 2000, as cited in Godfrey, 2018).

The Characteristics of SMEs in Africa

Countries	Percentage (%)	Reference
Botswana	75%	Mwobobia, (2012).
D.R. Congo	60%	The World Bank, (2017).
Ethiopia	90%	Central Statistic Agency (CSA), 2007
Ghana	75%	Musah, S., Daniel, B. and Joseph, W. (2015).
Kenya	80%	Kithae, (2012 as cited in Kamunge, M.S., Njeru, A., Tirimba, O. I. (2014).
Nigeria	70%	Eniola, A. A. and Ektebang, H. (2014).
South Africa	60%	Musah, S. Daniel, B. and Joseph, W. (2015).
Uganda	90%	Uganda Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives (MTIC), 2015.
Tanzania	65%	Kadete, (2014).

Zambia	88%	Bank of Zambia (BoZ) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), (2016).
Zimbabwe	60%	Nyoniand Bonga, (2018).

The above table indicates the contributions of SMEs to employment among some selected African countries, giving a percentage of the population which was employed in an SME. Therefore, there is a need for African organisational leaders to help SMEs develop a greater sense of purpose and provide effective leadership. An effective leader influences followers in a desired manner to achieve desired goals. Without leadership, the probability of mistakes occurring increases and the opportunities for success become more and more reduced (Kotter, 1990, as cited in Franco & Matos, 2013), organisational success or failure in SMEs is seriously affected by the managerial competencies of owner-managers (Hitt et al., 1996, as cited in Pansiri & Temtime, 2008). Given that most of the organisational leaders are working in SMEs, previous research studies (Pansiri & Temtime, 2008) have revealed that owner-managers\ leaders often spend too much time “firefighting” rather than leading the firm. As the environment of SMEs is dynamic rather than static, turbulent rather than stable, it requires managerial agility and capability.

The Social Environment in Africa

The process of socialisation plays a significant role in terms of respect for elderly people and fear of punishment among African employees. Firstly, in Africa, while growing up, one is socialised to respect elderly people and community leaders. Therefore, a younger person is not supposed to correct an elderly person even when they are wrong. This implies that a leader who is younger than his followers will be uncomfortable to correct an elderly person among his followers (Bulley et al., 2017). This is likely to act as a barrier to the process of providing effective leadership. Secondly, African employees tend to act with extreme caution while at work in order not to invite the anger of their superiors for any mistakes that they may make in the course of their work (Kuada, 2010). This is likely to result in pressure on employees to please others and avoid conflict and punishment even at the costs of production.

Previous studies done by Zoogah and Beugré (2013 as cited in Bulley et al., 2017) have revealed that a leader or manager who regularly seeks the opinion of his subordinates in African organisations is likely to be viewed as a weak, incapable leader. This is because African societies are characterised by high power distance which means that subordinates expect and accept the unequal distribution or hierarchical order of power and hence see an ideal leader as a person who should dictate to them what they should do (Zoogah & Beugré, 2013 as cited in Lituchy, Metwally & Henderson, 2017). On the other hand, a great leader is someone who acts as a superior father figure and makes all the important decisions (Lituchy, Metwally & Henderson, 2017). This is contrary to the findings of research work conducted at the UN by (Hochschild, 2010), according to which most effective UN leaders make a point of consulting downwards and listening to those who will be impacted by a decision. They are not shy to seek out the opinion of their inferiors.

The Economic Environment in Africa

According to Gado (2015), infrastructures like roads, water, security, power, transportation, and communication which have a positive impact on the performance of companies. Unfortunately, African SMEs face stiff competition, lack of markets, lack of finance, and the use of low levels of technology (Njanike, 2019). Environmental influences affecting leadership performance can include such factors as technology, facilities, the expertise of subordinates, and communication. For example, an aging factory or one lacking in high-speed technology could have a major impact on the nature of problem-solving activities (Northouse, 2016). African SMEs have difficulties in gaining access to appropriate technologies and information on available techniques. This limits innovation and SME competitiveness (Musah, Daniel & Joseph, 2015). Besides, most of the African countries have a challenge of inadequate infrastructural and institutional support: weak infrastructural facilities such as electricity, potable water, feeder roads. African organizational leaders face the challenges of poor product quality, high costs of production, and over-reliance on outdated and inefficient technology, technically inferior to large scale businesses (Nyoni & Bonga, 2018), power failure which increases the cost of production of small and medium scale enterprises (Kwaghe 2011 as cited in Gado, 2015). Musah, Daniel and Joseph (2015) argued that SMEs are weak in Africa because of small local markets, undeveloped regional integration and very difficult business conditions, even in middle-income countries such as Botswana and Egypt. African banks are reluctant to finance SMEs, as has been

demonstrated in a study conducted by Soledad and Peria (2009). The results of their studies revealed that in non-African developing countries, more than three-quarters of banks respond that the perceived profitability of the SME segment is a key driver for their involvement with SMEs, whereas only two-thirds of African banks point to this factor as being important. At the same time, less than 40 percent of banks in non-African developing countries indicate that macroeconomic factors are a significant obstacle to their involvement with SMEs, yet 60 percent of banks in Africa points to the state of the economy as constraining their involvement with these businesses. These responses suggest that policymakers in Africa have a role to play more so than elsewhere in the developing world in helping to promote SME finance by adopting sound macroeconomic policies that reduce risks and increase profitability when doing business in Africa. According to the World Bank (2017), key among these are corruption and limited access to electricity, as well as taxes, and limited access to finances - all within the context of a fragile, changeable and economic environment. Therefore, the above-mentioned challenges in the African economic environment are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa.

African Cultural Environment

The review of literature conducted by Kuada (2010) revealed that African cultures mainly inhibit effective leadership practices in Africa. According to Kan, Apitsa, and Adegbite (2015), African cultures have been regarded as a key factor in the failure of African organisations. The present study identified challenges such as age, giving the legitimacy of exercising power, a great leader is someone who acts as a superior father figure and makes all the important decisions, some organisational leaders were sometimes not confident enough to point out mistakes or support subordinates, while others allocate resources, giving preference to their personal culturally induced goals rather than overall organisational goals (Bulley et al., 2017; Kuada, 2010).

Galperin, Melyoki, Senaji, Mukanzi, and Michaud (2017) argued that leadership in Africa may generally be described as a directive. Directive leadership is autocratic, task-oriented, and persuasive and manipulative (Bass, 1995 as cited in Rezaei & Safa, 2019). It leads to lower acceptance of managerial decisions than a more participative leadership style (Bass, 1995). According to Rezaei and Safa (2019), a manager's leadership style creates a culture in the organisation that can influence employees' commitment to service delivered. A directive leadership style has negative influences on the employees' commitment to the quality of offered services to customers. Therefore, the lack of a participative leadership style in Africa is a hindrance to the process of providing effective organisational leadership.

CONCLUSION

The present study identified the following challenges that are likely to act as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa. Firstly, in terms of negative personal attributes; most of those who run SMEs in Africa lack formal skills in running enterprises. Therefore, they do not engage in actual strategic planning and often spend too much timesolving problems which could be prevented. They fail to treat organisational goals with the importance that these goals deserve and are frequently engaged in the search for personal interests and privileges. Sometimes African leaders are not confident enough to point out mistakes or sanction subordinates.

Secondly, in terms of readiness of the followers, African employees see an ideal leader as someone who must direct them, and a leader or manager who attempts to draw out the opinions of his subordinates in African organisations is likely to be seen as someone who does not know what he is supposed to do as a leader. Also, employees tend to act with extreme caution in order to avoid mistakes.

Thirdly, in terms of the economic environment in Africa, there are multiple challenges of inadequate and weak infrastructural facilities such as water, feeder roads, and power failures which increase the cost of production for small and medium scale enterprises. Furthermore, there is no adequate protection of intellectual property. Registration fees for some products in some government agencies are still the same for small or large firms, irrespective of resource availability. Additionally, African banks are reluctant to finance SMEs.

Fourthly, in terms of the social environment in Africa, the present study identified the following challenges as barriers to the process of providing effective leadership: A leader who is younger than his followers will be uncomfortable to correct an elderly person among his followers,

Fifthly, in terms of culture, some organisational leaders were sometimes not confident enough to point out mistakes or sanction subordinates. Leadership in Africa is generally described as directive which is autocratic, task-oriented, and persuasive and manipulative, and leaders fail to treat organizational goals seriously, frequently engaging instead

in the search for personal power and privileges. African culture mainly inhibits effective leadership practices in Africa.

SUGGESTIONS

The present study suggests the following effective ways of addressing the identified challenges that are likely to obstruct to the process of providing effective leadership in Africa:

Firstly, in terms of personal attributes, African organisational leaders need to be equipped with conceptual skills that are central to creating a vision and strategic plan for an organisation. This will provide them with the ability to engage in environmental scanning activities to understand the behavior of their competitors' trends so that they may be able to survive and prosper in today's unstable business environment. Besides, African organisational leaders need to be equipped with technical skills that play an essential role in producing the actual products their companies are designed to produce. This will include competencies in a specialised area, analytical ability, and the ability to use appropriate tools and techniques.

Secondly, in terms of readiness of the followers, African organisational leaders must empower their employees to act with confidence, encouraging independent thinking and creativity.

Thirdly, to strategically move to the physical areas where adequate infrastructural and institutional support are available; as they wait for the African governments to provide adequate infrastructural and institutional support throughout the country of operation. Also, policymakers in Africa have a role to play by adopting sound macroeconomic policies that reduce risks and increase profitability when doing business in Africa.

Fourthly, in terms of social challenges, African organizational leaders need to be equipped with interpersonal skills which will enable them to create an atmosphere of trust where employees can feel comfortable, secure and encouraged to become involved in the planning of things that will affect them.

Fifthly, in terms of culture, African organisational leaders can learn how to influence the culture positively with behaviors such as articulating a compelling vision, leading by example, introducing management programs and systems that will include employee selection, socialization, training, performance appraisal, and rewards. Besides, African organisational leaders can be trained in transformational leadership skills and hire more candidates who exhibit transformational leadership qualities and who have demonstrated success in working through others to meet a long-term vision.

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