

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: A SINE QUA NON TOWARD REVITALIZING NIGERIAN PUBLIC TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The essence of this paper is to broaden the notion of strategic leadership that has been primarily applied to profit oriented organizations, to nonprofits, particularly tertiary education institutions. Globally strategic leaders had been confirmed to play critical role in the implementation of development strategies in several tertiary institutions that led to drastic surge in effectiveness and performance of the institutions. The present assailing issues in Nigerian higher education institutions are yearning for managers that can strategically tackle the problems head on and revitalize the institutions. Achieving success in nonprofits like tertiary institutions requires leaders to imbibe the characteristics possess by strategic leaders viz; boldness, creativity, accepting innovation, proper communication etc. This will serve as bedrock toward the implementation of the institutional existing development strategies that are aimed at excellence. This conceptual paper assesses the essentiality of strategic leaders and their viability in ensuring sustainability in Nigerian tertiary institutions through effective strategy development and execution.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Tertiary Institutions, Nigeria, Effectiveness, Performance

INTRODUCTION

One of the most central areas of concern among contemporary organizational theorists and practitioners is organizational effectiveness. A good mechanism for achieving it is effective strategy implementation (Sharbat & Fuqaha, 2014; Ali & Hadi, 2012). The dramatical changes taking place in the higher education sector globally is compelling educational managers to switch from conventional style of management to more creative and dynamic management practices. This is due to the high level of competition taking place in the sector and persistence demand for increase in quality from different stakeholders as well as decline in government funding. This trend is pushing many higher education institutions to start adopting all the necessary measures that will enhance their performance and ensure students and stakeholder's satisfaction. Kong (2010) posited that public non-profit organizations (public tertiary institutions) are operating in a competitive environment characterised by continuous demand of service quality from community, increasing fierce competition from private sector, declining volunteer support as well as shrinking government funding. Public institutions of higher learning are focusing on ways to render superb and high quality services to their clients as well as struggling to attain better performance (Farid, Nejati & Mirta, 2008). As a result, the focus of the tertiary is no longer to graduate students only, but also improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness in all dimensions. The issue of higher educational efficiency is continued to gain more and more attention world over (Kazee, 2010). Nigeria is not an exemption to that. Gusau (2008) pointed out that several commissions of inquiry were established and many conferences were held in order to discuss issues regarding educational performance in Nigeria. The gatherings were aimed at searching for ways that will facilitate the improvement and enhancement of performance of tertiary institutions in the country. The higher education sector in Nigeria has witnessed dramatical surge, expansion and reforms in the last fifteen to twenty years (Oyediji, 2012). The main among these reforms is the liberalization of the tertiary education space that led to the emergence of huge number of private universities, polytechnics and colleges of education (Oyediji, 2012). This could be surmounted by using Levy's (1986) word: 'private challenges to public dominance in education'. Fehnel (2000) argued that these changes were having serious effects on the universities and other tertiary institutions because they represent major shifts in the higher education environment that will have an effect on the resources available to the institutions, their mission and the way they operate. The emergence of private tertiary institutions in Nigeria alongside with the opening of "corporate universities" or high talented education programmes are indeed reasons for public tertiary institutions administrators and academics to discern that finally competition has emerged in the higher education sphere (Oyediji, 2012).

Several factors are tip to have determine the successful execution of strategic plans in tertiary institutions (Silas & Gichinga, 2016) Among these factors according to Ongong'a (2014) are the role of leadership, organizational culture, organizational structure, technology, employees' training, among others. Despite to the fact that majority of tertiary institutions in Africa have several strategies aimed at excellence; yet, they hardly implemented them successfully due to lack of committed strategic leaders (Sila & Gichinga, 2016). This has left the public tertiary institutions to continuously be accused of producing graduates that are said to be discriminated against the international labour market and by foreign institutions, for those in quest of higher degrees (Okoro & Okoro, 2014).

Leadership in general and Strategic leadership in particular, is widely regarded by numerous scholars as one of the key elements that facilitate effective strategy implementation Lynch 2006; Collins 2001; Bossidy & Charan 2002; Thompson & Strickland 2003; Freedman & Tregoe 2003; Kaplan & Norton 2004; Pearce & Robinson 2007; Hrebiniak 2005. Lack of leadership, and specifically strategic leadership in an organisations, has been pencilled as one of the major obstacles to effective strategy execution (Alexander 1985; Beer & Eisenstat 2000; Kaplan & Norton 2004; Hrebiniak 2005). No doubt that effective institutional leadership couple with strong organizational culture are two main ingredients in successful implementation of organizational strategies as 'weak leadership can wreck the soundest strategy; forceful execution of even a poor plan can often bring victory' (Thompson *et al.*, 2007)

House and Aditya (1997) emphasized the paucity of researches on the relationship between strategic leadership with organizational effectiveness, and argued that until recently, the area is largely unresearched. Views that are more recent have equally called for more research on strategic leadership (Gardner *et. al*, 2010) this couple with the fact that investigation into the extant literature indicates lack of adequate researches on the essentiality of strategic leadership on strategy implementation in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Thus, this research could not have been better that now, that the Nigerian government is taking serious measures to revitalize the institutions for higher performance and efficiency.

THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Quite number of different definitions of strategic leadership is available in the extant literature. One of them is that of Finkelstein *et al.*, (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". Hambrick (2007) defined strategic leadership as being concerned with the whole scope of activities and strategic choice of the individual entities at the top of the organization. The definition gives more emphasizes on the

relational aspect in terms of both strategic as well as symbolic activities (Cannella, 2001). For the purpose of this study, the scope of strategic leadership have been widen to encompass, the chief executive of tertiary institutions, the deans and head of departments (Finkelstein et al., 2009). Hitt, Miller and Colella (2009) argued that while CEOs of companies or head of tertiary institutions might, for example organize a briefing for their employees pertaining a new strategy. Those that will be responsible for execution of the strategy are the middle managers (deans, directors, HOD etc). Without middle manager; argued Sila, & Gichinga, (2016), 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 paper, strategic leadership will be viewed as being concerned with the leadership “of” tertiary institutions, rather than “in” organizations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000, Özer and Tinaztepe, 2014).

Re-conceptualization of strategic leadership is very essential, because most of the leadership theorists available are based on the single-actor or hero leader (Kriger & Zhovtobryukh, 2013). This notion seems to be erroneous especially in the context of Nigerian tertiary institutions. People in tertiary intuitions are potential, if not actual, leaders at a time and under appropriate conditions. They may be entrenched in multiple, co-existing and growing networks of leadership, which form a valuable and difficult-to-copy source of social capital (Hesterly, 2010 and Barney, 1991). By and large, the paper 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 and Conger, 2003; Pearce et al., 2008; Gronn, 2002; Mehra et al., 2006; Day et al., 2004; Spillane, 2006) and also emphasizing on the qualities like boldness and creativity, embracing technological innovations and accepting changes etc. These are important internal variable that drives organization performance (Goldstein *et al.* 2014)

QUALITIES OF STRATEGIC LEADERS

Davies (2004) argues that the development of the strategically focused tertiary institution lies in the quality of the strategic leadership in the institution. Hence, Devies and Devies (2004) proposed nine qualities that strategic leaders in Nigerian tertiary institutions should imbibe on. They categorise the fact qualities into two broad categories; organizational qualities and personal qualities. However, we will quickly point out here that some of the qualities explained here resemble some qualities obtainable in other leadership styles. Thus, Devies (2004) concurred that it always a difficult task in academic literature to distinguish between the strategic leader and that of good leaders.

The Ability to be Oriented Strategically

This involves the ability of the leaders to consider both the long-term future (Beare, 2001; Adair, 2002), seeing the bigger picture, as well understanding the present contextual arrangement of their organization. Strategic orientation as put forward by Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1998) connotes the ability of the leaders to connect long-term visions and concepts to daily work. By this it suggest that 'visionary leaders are transformational by nature, and as such, they are quite different from planners, which of cause, is a managerial or a transactional process (Devies & Devies, 2007). Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1998, p. 1), suggests that 'visioning depends on understanding existing realities (culture, history, formative context) and developing a clear sense of direction for the organisation'.

Strategic Leaders Should Posses the Ability of Translating Organizational Strategies into Action by Converting them into Workable Terms

Kaplan and Norton (2001) posted that this can be done employing the 'strategy maps' and 'balanced scorecards' and further suggested that such approaches 'provide a framework to describe and communicate strategy in a consistent and insightful way' (p. 10).

Strategic Leaders Should Posses the Quality of Aligning People and Organization

This ability refers to aligning individual staff, or the institution as a whole, to a future state of the organization (Gratton, 2000; Davies, 2003). A key element to this, argued (Boal & Bryson, 1988), is the ability to encourage commitment through shared values.

Strategic Leaders Need to have the Ability to Decide on Effective Intervention Points

Strategic leaders should be able to define the key moments for strategic changes in their organizations. This is critical points in an institution's development when it comes possible to develop new visions, create new strategies and move through new directions. Devies and devies (2007) call these strategic opportunity points or strategic intervention..

Strategic Leader's Ability to Develop Strategic Capabilities is Another Important Quality.

Prahalad and Hamel's (1990) 'core competencies' and while Stalk et al.'s (1992) 'strategic capabilities' hold the ace here. Being creative in problem-solving by the leaders as well as encouraging team-work could be considered resources that provide the institutions with deep seated strategic capabilities or abilities. The capabilities enable the institutions to successfully conquer new challenges by restructuring existing abilities and resources instead of seeking new ones (Devies & Devies, 2007).

Strategic Leaders Show Dissatisfaction or Restlessness with the Present Condition

Senge (1990) describes restlessness as a 'creative tension' which emerges from seeing clearly where one wishes to be, one's vision, and facing the truth about one's current reality.' Strategic leaders should be able to envision the 'strategic leap' that their institution wants to make; while passionately acting as advocates for change. Strategic leaders ought to live with the reality that the institutional culture may not be as forward thinking as they are.

Strategic Leaders Possess Absorptive Capacity

Cohen and Levinthal (1990) explain that absorptive capacity is the capability to absorb new information and assimilate them, learn from them and most crucially to apply them to new ends. More so, Hambrick (1989) argued that strategic leadership take place in an environment implanted by ambiguity, complexity and informational overload. Therefore, It is essential for strategic leaders to recognize new information, analyse them and apply them to new outcomes.

Strategic Leaders Should have Adaptive Capacity

Black and Boal (1996) and Hambrick (1989) opined that the ability to change is regarded as 'adaptive capacity'. In an era of innovation and continuous learning, success may depend on flexible strategic responses. Leaders adapt and lead new strategic direction for the institution if they possess cognitive flexibility linked to the mindset that embraced and accepts changes (Devis & Devis, 2007).

Strategic Leaders Possess Leadership Wisdom

Wisdom is the ability to take the right action at the right time (Devis & Devis, 2007). Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 532) posited that 'most leadership researchers agree that leaders need to have important interpersonal skills as empathy, motivation, and communication'.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES ON THE ESSENTIALITY OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ON EFFECTIVE STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Strategic leaders have been widely acknowledged for their radical steps towards revitalizing moribund organizations. Empirical facts from the extant literature has shown how effective strategic leadership has transformed several ailing organizations for good. Quite number of scholars has continued to recognize and appreciate the role of strategic leaders toward effective strategy implementation in tertiary institutions world over.

Extensive literature review on role of strategic leaders in successful strategy execution in numerous tertiary institutions across the globe reveals a lot. Sila and Gichinga (2016)

conducted a study on the impact of strategic leadership on the performance of public universities in Kenya. The qualitative 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) shows that the three dimensions of strategic leadership they test gives reasonable contribution to strategy implementation in the institution. The dimensions are strategic expert (strategist), change agent, and visionary leadership. The study consists of 67 respondents from different strata in the sampled institution.

In their paper titled *Making Strategy Work*, Yang *et al.* (2009) posited that there are two type of implementation studies; the once that highlight the essentiality of individual factors for strategy implementation, as well as those that stress the big picture of how the factors correlate to form a strategic implementation environment. The first involves individual factors that accelerate strategy implementation like strategy formulation process, strategy implementers; managers and employees, structure, communication activities, level of commitment for the strategic plan, relationship among different departments and different strategic levels, the employed execution tactics and the administrative system in an institution. The second stream comprises multiple factors together within a single comprehensive model or framework.

Clement (2014) carried out a study on the impact of management in strategy development in Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Uganda Management Institute and Makerere University Business School. The outcome of the study indicated that management was very cardinal in the formulation of policies, sourcing for resources, communication of the institutional mission, vision, plan development as well as development of successive cultures among others.

Fuller (2012) studied the Leaders Role in Strategy Implementation in 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 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.

More so, 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 suggests that weak influence of managerial behaviours was as a result of the Management strategic thinking. He argued that

organizational leaders co-opting the subordinates like the faculty members would lead to effective strategy implementation.

On the other hand, Kalali *et.al* (2011) posited that, failure of strategy implementation in institutions of higher learning in Iraq today comprises of sixteen factors of which leadership role count up to 71%! He further lament 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 strategy 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 partnered the subordinates in the strategy implementation, the leadership will not be able to create a brilliant vision for any meaningful strategic program. Thus, Mapetere (2012) concurred that besides vision creation, leadership in an organizations helps to identify the relevant resources like the proper men and women for the strategy stride, promote proper communication, and invest in developing desired organizational cultures and host of others.

Throughout the African continent, the idea of effective strategy implementation is not new, however there have been a numeral challenges in various sectors, like educational institutions, banking, insurance etc (Silas & Gichinga, 2016). For instance, in South Africa, leadership is charged with several responsibilities in planning of strategies as well as its implementation (Jooste & Fourie, 2011). In the study they conducted title: 'the role of strategic leadership in effective strategy implementation: Perceptions of South African strategic leaders in Public Universities'; Jooste and Fourie (2011) affirmed that leadership, and particularly strategic leadership, is widely acknowledged as one of the key drivers of effective strategy implementation.

Research from Useem (2011) also reveals that, several identifiable factors characterized strategic leadership in South African public tertiary institutions. These factors includes: determining strategic directions, establishment of balanced organizational control, effectively management of organizational resource, nourishing an effective organizational culture, emphasizing ethical practices, *e.t.c*. Hence, strategic leaders have serious role to play in each of the strategic actions mentioned above. Therefore, Hitt *et.al* (2006) declares that each of these strategic leadership actions contribute positively to effective strategy implementation.

From the above review, we can deduces and appreciate the essentiality of strategic leadership toward the implementation of developing strategies in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The strategies that ought to geared toward revamping the institutions. Leadership skills really

matters in improving the effectiveness of public tertiary institutions, and it is highly likelihood that the most favourable leadership style is an integrated one; and leaders from those intuitions should behave mainly as strategic leaders (Orazi & Turini, 2013). More so, strategic leadership has been described as one of the key drivers of effective strategy implementation. Thompson *et al.* (2007) argued that there can be no doubt that effective institutional leadership couple with strong organizational culture is two central elements in facilitating successful execution organization's strategies and objectives. 'Weak leadership can wreck the soundest strategy; while forceful execution of even a poor plan can often bring victory' (Thompson *et al.*, 2007)

CONCLUSION

Strategic leaders play prominent roles in formulating implementing organizational strategies. Consequently, strategic leadership actions positively contribute to effectiveness of organizations. This is very true especially when it comes to implementation of important and daunting managerial techniques like strategy that is more about change Bringing about change, especially in higher education institutions, is not an easy task; because the institutions are characterised by vagueness in their mission and their tendency toward anarchy (Vroom, 1984). However, strategic leadership that rooted in creativity, boldness and relentless effort will be very crucial enabler in achieving high institutional effectiveness and performance in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The executive of higher educational institution should be a strategist, agent of change, as well as visionary leaders (Hidayah, et al. 2015).

The heads of tertiary institutions in Nigeria should imbibe the qualities that strategic leaders display. These qualities include boldness and creative; embracing technological innovations, as they need to know what technology revolution stands for in today's world and also how the technology can be used to leveraged their institutional needs. They should also look out for creative and open-minded staff who are excellently creative and think strategically; as well as adhering strictly to their institutional missions and vision, that are aimed at transforming the institutions.

WAY FORWARD

Since education is the backbone for any meaning development especially in this era of knowledge economy, it is very imperative for researchers to dwell more on investigating other factors that facilitated the execution of strategy in tertiary institutions especially in Nigerian context. Specifically more researches could be carried out to empirically test the role of strategic leadership on strategy execution in the institutions.

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