THE RELEVANCE OF THE SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY (SLT) TO ZIMBABWEAN SMEs: A CASE OF BULAWAYO'S CENTRAL BUSINESS AREA

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Abstract

Although Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have proved to be important to both developed and developing nations, they are more important to less developed countries because of unemployment and inequality challenges. While SMEs are invaluable to the Zimbabwean economy, research has shown that only 15 percent are expected to survive beyond 3 years as a result of lack of management capacity and unsuitable leadership style. Although the Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) is one of the theories that appear to be ideal to Zimbabwean SMEs, scholars have cautioned against a quick endorsement of the theory without careful analysis. The study sought to assess the relevance of the SLT to Zimbabwean SMEs. Quantitative research was conducted using a survey strategy where data was collected from 241 participants using a closed- ended questionnaire. The research was conducted in a way that safeguarded the interests of participants and in line with contemporary research ethics principles. The study found that employees were not given freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do

tasks. It was also found that leaders were not decreasing control when subordinates proved that they were responsible. As such, it was concluded that the SLT was not relevant to Zimbabwean SMEs. SME leaders are recommended to consider the maturity levels of employees when leading them.

Keywords: Leadership; Follower Maturity; Situational Leadership Theory; SMEs

INTRODUCTION

Although Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are important to developed nations, they have proved to be more important to less developed countries where unemployment and inequality are rampant. This is the reason why the majority of governments in less developed nations have begun to focus on SMEs as a solution to a myriad of economic and social challenges bedeviling their nations (Tinarwo, 2016). As such, SMEs may prove to be a solution to the socio-economic challenges that Zimbabwe has been facing for more than two decades (Nyamwanza, Paketh, Makaza and Moyo, 2016).

SMEs play a pivotal role in employment creation (Mugozhi and Hlabiso, 2017; Karedza, Sikwila, Mpofu and Makurumidze, 2014; Maseko and Manyani, 2011; Yon and Evans, 2011), enhancing a nation's exports (Mudavanhu, Bindu, Chigusiwa and Muchabaiwa, 2011) and increasing competition (Chipangura and Kaseke, 2012; Chinembiri, 2011). They also offer benefits such as offering tailor-made goods to societies (Mugozhi and Hlabiso, 2017), being the vanguard of innovative ideas (Muriithi, 2017), fortifying a nation's flexibility through diversification (Mugozhi and Hlabiso, 2017) and quickening the ownership of resources by the locals (Karedza et al., 2014). This is the reason why SMEs are regarded as the mainstay of the majority of the economies (Rahim, Abidin, Mohtar and Ramli, 2015).

Most Zimbabwean SMEs have been found to be survivalist as compared to being opportunity based (FinScope, 2012). This means that most people are pushed into establishing SMEs for the purpose of taking care of their families rather than being pulled into SMEs because of the existence of an opportunity. This has been corroborated by Karedza et al., (2014) who observed that most SMEs in Zimbabwe are subsistence in nature.

Although SMEs are invaluable to the Zimbabwean economy, research has shown that there is a higher chance that 85% of SMEs established will not exist beyond 3 years (Mudavanhu et al., 2011). The high failure rate has been largely blamed on lack of management capacity (Fatoki, 2014; Gombarume and Mavhundutse, 2014; Karedza et al., 2014) and unsuitable leadership style (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2017; Jalal-Eddeen, 2015; Saasongu, 2015; Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012).

The survival and growth of SMEs rests on effective leadership (Lekhanya, 2015). If SMEs are to be viable and succeed, correct leadership behaviours should be enhanced (Arham, Boucher and Muenjohn, 2013). This is because exhibiting accurate leadership behaviours prevents an organisation from failing and sets it on a firm path to achieve sustainable success (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2017). Although there are many leadership theories from which SME leaders may choose, the SLT appears to be among the ones that are ideal to Zimbabwean SMEs. This is because of the theory's belief that there exists no perfect leadership style that the leader may depend on but the leader should use a style that is in line with the prevailing situation (Uchenwamgbe, 2013). Although the SLT might appear to be ideal at face value, the challenge is on whether it is relevant to SMEs in Zimbabwe. As such, the purpose of the current research was to assess the relevance of the SLT to Zimbabwean SMEs.

Problem Statement

Although there is no leadership theory that has been developed specifically for SMEs in Zimbabwe or Africa, the SLT is one of the few that appear to be ideal for the sector. This is because the theory advocates for different styles that are in line with the prevailing situation. Although the theory has proved to be popular, many limitations have been unearthed leading to Robbins and Coulter (2012) cautioning a quick endorsement of the theory. The challenge is whether the SLT in its prescriptive form is relevant to Zimbabwean SMEs.

Research Questions

i.   Do leaders give employees freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks?
ii.   Do leaders exercise patience when giving instructions to employees?
iii. Do leaders decrease control when employees show that they are responsible?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership

Leadership has been found to be among the essential topics in human sciences although very few people have a clear understanding of what it means (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). This has resulted in numerous definitions of the phenomenon (Silva, 2016; McCleskey, 2014; Peretomode, 2012). Silva (2016, p. 3) defined leadership as "the process of interactive influence that occurs when in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals". We can conclude from the above definition that there are three essential elements necessary for leadership to take place namely leader, follower, and the situation.

A leader should have the ability to persuade others to follow him/her so that they collectively achieve a certain goal (El Namaki, 2017). Followers are necessary in the leadership process so that they give feedback to leaders (Mwangi, 2014). Modern leadership is regarded as a role that one changes depending on the context (Klingborg, Moore and Varea-Hammond, 2006). This is the reason contemporary leadership emphasise on the sharing of the role with followers (Stincelli and Baghurst, 2014). In engendering effective leadership, followers have a responsibility of holding their leaders accountable (Poncian and Mgaya, 2015). This is the reason why in some instances the blame of bad leadership should be shared by both leaders and followers alike.

Leadership theories

There exist different classifications of leadership theories (Silva, 2015; Mendez et al., 2013). However, the main ones include theories fixated on the leader as an individual and those which looks at the relationship between the leader and followers. There are numerous leadership theories which include the great man theory which emphasises the hero status of the leader (Kumar and Matheen, 2019), the trait theory that looks at characteristics distinguishing leaders from non-leaders (Ali, 2017) and the behavioural theories which focus on the behaviour exhibited by the leader (Khan, Bhat and Hussanie, 2017). Included on the list are the contingency theories which believe that there exists no superior leadership style that can be effective in all the situations (Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube, 2015).

Situational Leadership Theory (SLT)

The early leadership theories have been criticised for adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. According to the SLT there exists no perfect leadership style because the style adopted depends on the obtaining situation (Uchenwamgbe, 2013). As such, one situation may demand a certain leadership style while another situation may demand a different style. If leadership is to be effective, the leader should be able to comprehend the situation and implement an appropriate leadership style (Koech and Namusonge, 2012).

The theory stresses the importance of followers because they either rejects or accepts the leader (Robbins and Coulter, 2012). The actions of the followers determine whether the organisation will be effective or not. The SLT relates the leadership style to the developmental level of an individual (Ebere and Fragouli, 2015). The situation encompasses the maturity of followers and whether the leader is relationship or task oriented (Australian Public Service Commission, 2018). Maturity represents the capacity and readiness of followers to accomplish a given task (Robbins and Coulter, 2012). Effective leaders choose a leadership style based on

the maturity of employees (Henkel and Bourdeau, 2018; Ali, 2017; McCleskey, 2014). The leader should be prepared to substitute task behaviour for relationship behaviour as the maturity level of followers increase (Khan et al., 2017).

SLT is easy to comprehend, practical and widely accepted (Shonhiwa, 2016). It differs from other leadership theories in that it prescribes what the leader is expected to do in certain situations. However, scholars such as Graeff (1983) and Yukl (1989) both cited in Shonhiwa (2016) have questioned the validity of the questionnaires which were used for the SLT model. The scholars believed that there was bias since respondents had fewer options on selecting the best leadership style other than directing, coaching, supporting and delegating. Zigarmi and Roberts (2017) argued that the telling style reserved for followers who are high in commitment and low in competence was used erratically in contemporary organisations. Thompson and Glaso (2018) lamented the inadequate empirical evidence of the model's descriptive accuracy.

The empirical validation of the assumptions and suggestions articulated in the theory have not been enough (Shonhiwa, 2016). Although the prescriptive positions advocated by the theory have been popular for many decades, they have not been adequately tested empirically (Thompson and Glaso, 2018). The few researches that have been published have shown mixed results (Papworth, Milne and Boak, 2009). There is also lack of consistency between the earlier and later versions concerning the development levels of the followers (Shonhiwa, 2016). The theory did not take into consideration the role that certain demographic variables such as level of education, age, gender and experience play in the relationship between the leader and followers. A study conducted by Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) cited in Shonhiwa (2016) showed differences of preferences in terms of age and gender. Women preferred different leadership styles as compared to those preferred by men. Younger employees had a preference for less structure as compared to older employees. The criticisms levelled against the SLT have resulted in Robbins and Coulter (2012) encouraging caution when it comes to the commendation of the theory.

METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by the positivism philosophy while the approach to theory development was deductive. The philosophy was chosen because of its belief that the world is real and that scientific methods can be employed to ascertain these realities (Walliman, 2011). The approach was chosen because it complements the chosen philosophy (Kivunya and Kuyini, 2017) and the study is completed faster as long as sufficient time is provided in setting up the research before collecting and analysing the data (Saunders et al., 2016).

Research design and strategy

The study used a quantitative research design because of the relationship between the positivism philosophy and quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2016; Neuman, 2014). The researcher also sought to quantify attitudes, behaviours and opinions (Mohajan, 2020). The research employed a survey strategy where data was collected using a questionnaire (Apuke, 2017; Greener, 2008). The survey strategy was chosen because it is the popular strategy in social sciences (Neuman, 2014) and it allowed for quantitative data to be collected and analysed statistically (Saunders et al., 2016).

Population and sampling

The study's population comprised of all non-managers, supervisors, managers and owner-managers of SMEs operating in Bulawayo's Central Business Area (CBA). The sample of the study was 300 and was chosen using proportional stratified sampling technique. The population was first divided into different strata on the basis of the sector the SME operated. A random sample was then taken in proportion to the size of the stratum in the population. Proportional stratified sampling was ideal because the researcher had knowledge about the population (Jawale, 2012). The sample was distributed as shown by table below.

Table 1: Sample distribution by sector

Sector	% Share	Non-managerial	Supervisor	Manager	Owner-manager	Total
Retail & Commercial	45%	81	36	9	9	**135**
Services	24%	43	19	5	5	**72**
Manufacturing	10%	18	8	2	2	**30**
Agriculture	6%	11	5	1	1	**18**
Mining	6%	11	5	1	1	**18**
Construction	5%	9	4	1	1	**15**
Other	4%	7	3	1	1	**12**
Total	**100%**	**180**	**80**	**20**	**20**	**300**

Data analysis

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Descriptive statistics, in particular frequency distributions were used to show the frequency occurrence of each possible outcome.

Ethics

The research was conducted in a way that safeguarded the interests of participants (Magwa and Magwa, 2015). Firstly, access to the different SMEs was properly sought (Saunders et al., 2016) Adequate information was given to potential participants before they signed consent forms. Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity were given and respected throughout the research. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage of the study and data collected was used only for the academic purpose for which it was collected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Response rate

Out of the 300 questionnaires that were distributed, 241 were returned and used for data analysis. This gave a response rate of 80.33%.

Demographic profile of respondents

The majority (62.2%) of the respondents were non-managerial, followed by 26.1% who were supervisory respondents. 6.6% of the respondents were owner-managers while 5.0% were managers. The highest number (44.8%) of respondents had attained degree level education followed by 30.3% who had attained diploma level education as shown by table 2 below.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Position	Non-managerial	150	62.2
	Supervisor	63	26.1
	Manager	12	5.0
	Owner-manager	16	6.6
	Total	241	100
Level of education	Below Ordinary level	8	3.3
	Ordinary level	13	5.4
	Advanced level	5	2.1
	Certificate level	16	6.6
	Diploma level	73	30.3
	Degree level	108	44.8
	Post Graduate level	18	7.5
	Total	241	100

Findings in table 2 above showed that non-managerial respondents were the majority followed by supervisory respondents. This is in line with how most organisations are structured. Owner-managers outnumbered managers since most SME owners in Zimbabwe are actively involved in their businesses. Findings showed that 75.1% of respondents had attained either diploma or degree level of education. This showed that SMEs in Zimbabwe were resourced by people who were relatively educated.

Freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks

96.7% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that employees were given freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks as shown by table 3 below. 2.5% of the respondents agreed while 0.8% were neutral.

Table 3: Freedom to decide what, how, when, where to do tasks

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Our leader gives us freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks.	55.6	41.1	0.8	2.5	

When analysed in terms of organisational position, findings showed that 98% of non-managerial, 93.6% of supervisory, 100% of managerial and 93.8% of owner-managerial respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that leaders gave freedom to employees to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks as shown by table 4 below.

Table 4: Freedom to decide what, how, when, where to do tasks in relation to position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	64.7	33.3	0.0	2.0	
Supervisor	47.6	46.0	1.6	4.8	
Manager	16.7	83.3	0.0	0.0	
Owner-manager	31.3	62.5	6.3	0.0	

(chi-square = 25.582, df = 9, p<0.01)

These findings showed that both leaders and followers believed that employees were told what, how, when and where to do tasks without factoring into cognisance the maturity of employees as advocated by the SLT (Henkel and Bourdeau, 2018; Shonhiwa, 2016).

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When analysed in terms of level of education, the findings showed that all the respondents who had attained below ordinary level and ordinary level education either strongly disagreed or disagreed that employees were given freedom to decide what, how, when and where to do tasks. 80% of those who had attained advanced level, 93.8% of those who had certificate level, 98.7% of those who had attained diploma level, 97.2% of those who had attained degree level and 88.9% of those who attained post graduate level of education also either strongly disagreed or disagreed as shown by table 5 below.

Table 5: Freedom to decide what, how, when and where
to do tasks in relation to education level

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Below Ordinary level	75.0	25.0			
Ordinary level	76.9	23.1			
Advanced level	60.0	20.0		20.0	
Certificate level	43.8	50.0		6.3	
Diploma level	60.3	38.4		1.4	
Degree level	50.9	46.3		2.8	
Post graduate level	50.0	38.9	11.1		

(chi-square = 22.167, df = 18, p>0.05)

These findings revealed that employees were told what, how, when and where to do tasks without taking into consideration the level of education they had attained. As a result, we can deduce that leaders were not taking into consideration the different maturity levels of employees contrary to what was enunciated by Henkel and Bourdeau (2018).

Being patient when giving instructions

88% of the respondents were of the view that leaders were not patient when giving instructions while 7% were of the view that leaders were patient as shown by table 6 below. The remaining 5% of the respondents were neutral.

Table 6: Leader being patient when giving instructions

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Our leader is patient when giving instructions.	34.9	53.1	5.0	6.2	0.8

When these findings were analysed according to organisational position, 95.3% of non-managerial and 93.6% of supervisory respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that leaders were patient when giving instructions. 50% of the managers were of the view that they were not patient while 33.3% were of the view that they were patient. 16.7% remained neutral. When it came to owner-managers, 31.3% were of the view that they were patient while 25.1% were of the view that they were not patient. 43.8% of owner-managers were neutral as shown by table 7 below.

Table 7: Our leader is patient when giving instructions in relation to organisational position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	42.0	53.3	0.7	3.3	0.7
Supervisor	31.7	61.9	3.2	1.6	1.6
Manager		50.0	16.7	33.3	
Owner-manager	6.3	18.8	43.8	31.3	

(chi-square = 72.843, df = 12, p<0.01)

These findings proved that only a few leaders were confident that they were patient. As such we can deduce from the findings that leaders were not patient when giving instructions to employees.

Decreasing control when employees show that they are responsible

Findings showed that 90.8% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that leaders decreased control when employees showed that they were responsible as shown by table 8 below. 6.6% of the respondents were of the view that leaders decreased control when subordinates showed that they were responsible while the remaining 2.5% were neutral.

Table 8: Leader decreasing control when employees show that they are responsible

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Our leader decreases control when we show that we are responsible.	59.3	31.5	2.5	5.8	0.8

When these findings were analysed in relation to organisational position, 93.3% of non-managers, 92.1% of supervisors, 91.6% of managers and 62.6% of owner-managers were of

the view that leaders were not decreasing control when employees proved that they were responsible as highlighted by table 9 below.

Table 9: Decrease in control when employees are responsible in relation to position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	68.0	25.3	0.7	5.3	0.7
Supervisor	61.9	30.2	1.6	4.8	1.6
Manager	8.3	83.3	8.3		
Owner-manager	6.3	56.3	18.8	18.8	

(chi-square = 50.519, df = 12, p<0.01)

When the findings were analysed in relation to level of education, all the respondents who had attained below ordinary level and ordinary level education either strongly disagreed or disagreed that leaders decreased control when employees showed that they were responsible. 80% of those who had attained advanced level, 68.8% of those who had attained certificate level, 97.2% of those who had attained diploma level, 93.5% of those who had attained degree level and 61.1% of those who had attained post graduate level of education were also of the view that leaders were not decreasing control as shown by table 10 below.

Table 10: Decrease in control when employees are
responsible in relation to level of education

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Below Ordinary level	62.5	37.5			
Ordinary level	61.5	38.5			
Advanced level	60.0	20.0			20.0
Certificate level	50.0	18.8		31.3	
Diploma level	61.6	35.6		2.7	
Degree level	63.9	29.6	3.7	2.8	
Post graduate level	27.8	33.3	11.1	22.2	5.6

(chi-square = 45.930, df = 24, p<0.01)

These findings showed that supervisors, managers and owner-managers who were expected to decrease control when employees proved that they were responsible were not doing so. One plausible reason could have been fear of things going wrong after decreasing

control. Another reason could have been the desire by owner-managers to tightly control their businesses. Findings also showed that 96.2% of the respondents were of the view that employees with the requisite knowledge and skills contributed meaningfully to their organisations as shown by table 11 below.

Table 11: Employees contributing meaningfully to their organisations

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Employees with the requisite knowledge and skills contribute meaningfully to the organisation.		0.8	2.9	89.6	6.6

As employees are educated, they acquire the requisite knowledge and skills and become competent (Thompson and Glaso, 2018). As such, leaders are expected to substitute directive behaviour with supportive behaviour. The evidence from the findings that leaders were reluctant to decrease control even with educated employees showed that their unwillingness to decrease control had nothing to do with whether employees were responsible or not. One conceivable reason could have been the desire of most SME leaders who were also owner-managers to keep a tight control over their businesses. An analysis of the findings also showed that 95% of the respondents were of the view that leaders should respect followers who were older than them. Findings from this study demonstrated that demographic variables such as age and education which had not been taken into consideration by the SLT were important factors to consider. This is consistent with the findings of Vecchio and Boatwright (2002).

Findings disclosed that employees were treated the same notwithstanding their levels of maturity which is different from the prescriptions enunciated by the SLT. According to the SLT employees must be treated differently on the basis of their maturity levels and the task at hand (Thompson and Glaso, 2018). As such, leaders are expected to use both directive and supportive behaviour depending on the competence and commitment of subordinates (Shonhiwa, 2016). However, study findings revealed that leaders focused more on directive behaviour as compared to supportive behaviour. Supportive behaviour such as being responsive to the needs of employees, listening to them and allowing their input was lacking. As such, the study found that the SLT was not applicable to Zimbabwean SMEs in its prescriptive form. This finding corroborated the finding of Ebere and Fragouli (2015).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that the SLT was not relevant to SMEs in Zimbabwe. This is because leaders were not taking into cognisance the level of maturity of employees when leading them as advocated by the SLT. The study also concluded that subordinates were told what, how, when and where to do tasks regardless of their levels of maturity and leaders were not decreasing control when employees showed that they were responsible.

SME leaders are recommended to consider the maturity levels of employees when leading them. They should use both directive and supportive behaviour depending on the competence and commitment of employees. SME leaders should allow mature employees freedom to decide how, when and where they do their tasks rather than telling them as this may end up demotivating them. When employees show that they are responsible, SME leaders should begin to decrease control step by step until they assume the role of facilitators and mentors. Future researchers should explore the role played by gender and work experience in the relationship between the leader and followers. Future studies should also look at the relevance of the Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) in SMEs in other geographical areas and in other organisations outside SMEs.

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