



STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: A TOOL FOR INSTITUTIONALIZING EFFECTIVENESS IN UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA IN A CHALLENGING AND COMPETITIVE EDUCATIONAL ARENA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviewed and codified strategic leadership: a tool for institutionalizing effectiveness in universities in Nigeria in a challenging and competitive educational arena. The Education arena is changing more rapidly and more dramatically than ever before: technology, globalisation, competition, the rise in the expectations of stakeholders in the education industry are fundamentally reshaping the education arena. Issues about the nature of leadership, strategic leadership, gains of strategic leadership, key strategic leadership actions, amongst others were examined. However, the paper concluded that leadership is the synergizing of the leadership skills and that of the employees' skills for effective performance that results in increased productivity. The paper recommended amongst others that there should be leadership institutes for educators in the university system in Nigeria. This becomes expedient as the educators are the leaders and strategic leaders .but those were not their career paths.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Institutionalizing Effectiveness, Universities, Nigeria, Challenges Competitive Education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Education arena is changing more rapidly and more dramatically than ever before: technology, globalisation, competition, the rise in the expectations of stakeholders in the education industry are fundamentally reshaping the education arena (Davies, 2006, 2007; Adams, 2000). In order to be able to deal with such a complex and dynamic environment, each university will need not only experienced individuals with well-developed leadership abilities but who are

also strategic leaders (Kolzow, 2014) Taking globalization and challenges associated with it into consideration, the very significant role of a university leader cannot be overemphasized. It is the duty of each university leader to ensure that the institution has a fit-for - the - purpose strategic plan and that it is implemented effectively (Murphy & Crowfoot, 2021). Never has this responsibility been more important, the rapid expansion of social media and the way knowledge is being proliferated has placed universities at the epicenter of human creativity and learning, critical to the survival and thriving of the earth. Meanwhile, the forces acting on universities have grown in complexity and are continuously accelerating. Stakeholders that institutions serve and rely on to enable them succeed keep on expanding continuously both in number and diversity accompanied with very high expectations. Little wonder that much is expected from each university. This is where the issue of Strategic Leadership (SL) comes in. Every institution's strategic leadership must begin with a vision of what it aspires to be, what it must become, and to discharge its mission in society. As noted by Aviolo (2005), a key step for moving forward is a clear vision of the future. Getting that vision relies on extensively scanning the horizon, much guesswork and a lot of consultation. There is a growing sense of universities being at a crisis point (Murphy & Crowfoot, 2021), a time of transformation driven by multiple economic, political and environmental pressures. This time cannot be ignored. It is also indeed a period of total transformation of the tertiary education system. The unenvisaged COVID 19 pandemic and its unenvisaged impacts on all aspects life underscore the urgency of addressing how to strategize universities to meet the current needs as well as that of the future It is in this light that this paper addresses the nature and importance of strategic leadership, strategic planning and implementation and steps to take in strategizing for the future.

The Nature of Leadership

Leadership permeates society, but from the perspective of formally established institutions and production organizations, it is the identification, development, and use of institutional or organisational leadership which is critical to performance (Rowe, 2001; Thompson et al., 2007). It is generally accepted that leadership is a key determinant of organisational performance because leaders make a difference (Robbins et al. 2010). Leaders help people join forces to bring about positive results (Taylor & Rosenbach, 2006). Leadership determines the success or collapse of any institution or organization.

While leadership is clearly important, there is debate about the process and nature of leadership (Kolwoz, 2014). Robbins et al. (2010) defined leadership as the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of a vision or a set of goals. Morrill (2007) and Redmond (2017), saw leadership as the ability to influence people toward the attainment of organisational goals. Robbins et al. (2010) distinguished the leadership role from the managerial role, stating that managers merely use the authority inherent in formal positions to obtain compliance from organisational members. An effective manager will however have to possess and utilise significant leadership ability. The leader is better perceived as a coach instead of a supervisor (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). The coaching perception would require the leader to select followers, give them directions, train and develop new skills and help them in getting access to other information necessary for job performance (Aziri et al., 2016).

Reintegrating on these further, other researchers such as Barker (1944) and Aziri et al. (2016), opined that leadership is not necessarily a job of the person in charge - rather, it is a

function of the collective will and needs of individuals organized to meet those various job assignments. Secondly, the process of leadership should be seen as an exchange of the individual qualities, adaptation and development. Thirdly, leadership is a process of synergy, not structure. In essence, leadership involves both the leaders and employees combining their skills in the workplace for effective job performance so that the goals of establishing that organization can be achieved. Leadership draws out the best from the employees. This is what Educational leadership is all about. Hence, Yan and Han (2016) defined educational leadership as the quality and competence of exerting leading influence on educational organization members, teachers and faculty, students, and diverse stakeholders within and beyond certain educational organizations and settings toward the achievement of educational visions and goals. From these various definitions and explanations, it can be reduced that attainment of goals involves the collaborate efforts of leaders and employees. Leaders need the employees to succeed and employees need leaders to synchronize their skills. They both play complementary roles.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership is a concept that is currently attracting the interests of researchers in the field of Leadership Studies in Education. As noted by Carvalho et al. (2021), despite the fact that strategy and strategic leadership are critical issues for school leaders, not much has been researched into it. According to them, "most of the theoretical and empirical work on strategy and strategic leadership over the past decades has been related to non-educational settings, and scholarship devoted to these issues in education is still minimal (Kolzow, 2014). Meanwhile each institution's efficacy, improvements and success, both now and the future very much depend upon it. Strategic leadership is a strong pillar in strategically focused schools (Chen, 2008). What then is strategic leadership? Below are some definitions of the term.

Eacott (2006) defined strategic leadership as leadership strategies and behaviors relating to the initiation, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of strategic actions within an educational institution, taking into consideration the unique context (past, present, and future) and availability of resources, physical, financial and human. This definition emphasized four key elements of strategic leadership. These are that strategic leadership: (1) acts in a proactive way to contextual changes; (2) leads school analysis and response to changing environment; (3) leads planning and action for school effectiveness and improvement in face of contextual challenges and; (4) leads monitoring and evaluation processes to inform decision making strategically (Cheng, 2010). This definition and explanation highlighted the complex and dynamic nature of strategic leadership as it is: a complex, social activity that considers important historical, economic, technological, cultural, social, and political influences and challenges (Eacott, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2014).

To Hopkins et al. (2014), strategic Leadership is seen as the managerial ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, and empower others to create strategic change as necessary. This definition emphasized the existence of a leader with a vision of the future and realizing the important role the skilled employees will play in bringing the vision to reality. It also involves putting strategies in place to tackle unforeseen and anticipated challenges. This could be compared to business strategies, where leadership strategies are based on a thorough analysis of the current situation and an informed view of the future. The strategy then provides a series of recommendations to close the gap between the current situation and desired future.

Once the leadership strategy is known, a development strategy is then formulated that will produce the desired future state. When the strategy is implemented, the outcomes or results are closely monitored in order to provide feedback on how well the strategy is working and help shape what new strategies can be considered (Carvalho et al., 2021; Pasmore, 2014).

It is important to recognise that strategic Leadership is not an organisational position, rather, it is an approach, a process or style at the disposal of those in managerial positions (Kolwoz, 2014; Eacott, 2010). It is equally of relevance to recognize the changing nature of leadership. In contemporary writings, the leader is described as a member of a group, with specific possibilities to influence the group. Consequently, leadership is a series of interaction processes where leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future (Parry & Bryman, 2006; Kolwoz, 2014). Thus, leadership is seen as a collaborative and collective responsibility where the responsibilities, competencies and decision-making need to be distributed onto several individuals rather than on just one person (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). These assertions are pointed out in view of the fact that even though there can be no leadership without leaders, the skills, competencies and abilities of leaders become effective dimensions of leadership only if, they are woven into an encompassing process of decision-making that is oriented to the achievement or realization of organizational goals (Eacott, 2008a).

Until the capacities of leadership are woven into the realization of shared purposes and commitments, they are dormant resources waiting to be defined and given content. In essence, unless the leader's abilities are manifested in carrying others along and also inspire a larger meaning than individual proficiency, they do not meet the tests of leadership as complementary efforts between the leader and skilled leaders. In addition, engaging and intentional leadership cannot be sustained without the hard and effective work of skilled leaders (proficient employees) whose competencies and qualities are necessary and required for productivity (Davis, 2003; Davis & Davis, 2010). In effect, leadership is that stimulant which gingers the extra zeal and sacrifice the skilled leaders will make to ensure the success of the achievement of institutional goals.

In the university environment, the institution's leadership will reflect in the commitment of the teaching and non-teaching members of staff to their job performance. This also will manifest in students' commitment to learning. All of these put together sets the institution's tone, determines its character and thus create its own unique identity, which sets it apart from other.

The Strategic Leader

As noted by Rowe (2001), the Strategic Leader is not easy to come by. However, they possess certain identifiable attributes. They are a synergistic combination of what is best about both the Visionary Leader and the Managerial Leader. They have the ability to balance the more short term success and operational needs of the institution with the longer term strategic futuristic successes. They integrate the vision, creativity and innovation necessary for long term success while maintaining the current stability and equilibrium of the institution. The Strategic Leader is able to connect with the people around them and has strong performance expectations. An institution with such a strategic leader lays a strong foundation for the institution's success at all times.

Gains of Strategic Leadership

A university is a very complex entity that needs a wide range of depth of knowledge and experience for it to be effectively managed. These can only be provided by a team of senior skilled leaders. The analysis, insight and decisions made by the team are key knowledge to the success of the institution. No two institutions are the same but none can be successful without such teams. Through their vision, what they say and how they act will significantly and positively influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of all in the university (Redmond, 2017).

Effective strategic leadership is responsible for strategic thinking and decision-making, as well as creating the institutional context that will ensure long-term success. This makes the strategic leadership and the team an important school -based strategic resources and this can make a competitive difference (Hoskins et al., 2014). It is that often leads to some institutions being more successful than others.

Strategic leadership pursues a new vision and new aims for education by maximizing learning opportunities for students through an integrative process of globalization, localization and individualization in education (Cheng, 2010).

Strategic Leadership: Why So challenging?

Leadership is an extremely difficult phenomenon to achieve due to the complexity involved in organizing and managing internal and external stakeholders in any organization or any human society (Gentry et al., 2016). Amongst the internal challenges to Strategic Leadership as identified by them are:

- Developing Managerial Effectiveness—the challenge of developing the relevant skills—such as prioritization, strategic thinking and decision-making, are not skills that could develop automatically. This is more so as institutional leadership is not a career path.
- Inspiring Others— it is not an easy task inspiring or motivating others to ensure they are committed and satisfied with their jobs.
- Developing Employees—the challenge of developing others, including topics for mentoring and coaching them to be leaders as it is such employees that complement leadership for institutional success.
- Leading a Team—team-building, team development, team management and how to instill pride in a team or support the team are difficult challenges. Even more challenging is how to lead a big team as well as what to do when taking over a new team.
- Guiding Change—the challenge of managing, mobilizing, understanding, and leading change. How to mitigate change consequences, overcome resistance to change, and deal with employees' reaction to change.
- Managing Internal Stakeholders and Politics—the challenge of managing relationships, politics, and image. Gaining managerial support and managing up; getting buy-in from other departments, groups, or individuals.

Murphy and Crowfoot (2021), pointed out some societal challenges facing universities in Europe which of course are similar to what obtains in Nigeria. Among them are the ones itemized below:

- Many universities face the challenge of continuous underfunding. This is one of the most enduring challenges facing public universities in Nigeria.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated change. This is leading to a rapid expansion in digital provision and research capacity to solve major societal challenges. This is likely to have a long-lasting impact in the future. The knowledge base built by curiosity-driven basic research has been the foundation of a quick response to the challenge and should be preserved in order to prepare for future challenges. This was the case with universities in Europe. This should also be a stimulant for our universities to be centers for research in meeting such an unforeseen circumstances.
- The supersonic speed of digitalisation and technological developments, in particular Artificial Intelligence (AI), are changing lives and disrupting labour markets. Universities produce knowledge for new technologies and social innovation. The development and promotion of such innovation is a central element of their activities. With limited research capabilities, many of the universities in Nigeria will find it challenging to evolve at such a speed to produce graduates that are equipped for labour markets that are changing so fast.
- There is an erosion of the public debate through misinformation. The spread of false information, fabricated evidence and the concept of “alternative truth” undermine the value of evidence and the role of science in society. Through social media, there is this indirect message that "basically- everything- can -be -learnt -online-so-why- university - education " Universities need to position themselves on this issue and find new and more effective ways to help counter this trend.
- There is the challenge that is unique to public universities in Nigeria: the influence of politics on appointing university leaders referred to as Vice Chancellors (VCs). Governments whether at the Federal or State levels, are in complete control of the appointments. At the State level, such leaders may be an educator from a different institution entirely. Due to the fact that educators in the institutions have no impute in the selections of such individuals occupying the leadership positions,

Key Strategic Leadership Actions

Hoskins et al. (2014) identified a number of activities that effective strategic leaders and their teams should focus on in order to increase performance. These activities are not mutually exclusive, but necessarily overlap.

Determining Strategic Direction

The strategic leadership team must develop a clear vision for their institution. The development, articulation and communication of an exciting vision are critical tasks of the strategic leadership team. They need to “paint a vivid picture” of where they hope the institution will be in 5-10 years’ time, get staff to key into it and commit to this future. It is the vision that serves as a destination point for the institution and therefore acts as a guide for strategy formulation and implementation. For the vision to have any impact, it must be communicated and reinforced front time to time. The generalities of the vision should be broken into measurables – or specific

targets – with commitment from all particularly from those at the management level (Mullane, 2002).

Exploiting and Maintaining Core Competencies

There is a common saying that there are schools and there are schools. It is because some institutions are more recognized as academically successful institutions. Core competences can be described as the resources and capabilities of a firm that serve as a source of competitive advantage over its rivals; they are those things the firm has or does that allow it to set itself apart from competitors (Thompson et al., 2007). Senior management must ensure that the institution's core competences are maintained, invested in and developed over time to ensure they remain relevant. These competences should be a part of the building blocks of the competitive leadership strategy. There should be high emphasis to continually improve performance, while promote an enabling culture and also nurture a results-oriented work climate (Thompson et al. 2007; Davis, 2004)

Developing Human Capital

Employees are a capital resource that requires investment. In this era of globalised and dynamic challenging environment, people are perhaps the only truly sustainable source of institutional success. Building human capital requires investment in training and development, and requires that senior management provide the support and budget necessary to make this happen. Currently as it stands, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), is effectively doing this for universities in Nigeria particularly for those publicly owned.

Sustaining an Effective Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is the personality of the organisation. It is the identity. Thompson et al. (2007), defined internal work climate and personality, which have resulted due to the organisation's core values, beliefs, performance principles, traditions, ingrained behaviours, work practices, and styles of operating.

Organisational culture can be a source of competitive advantage. It creates the context in which the organisation develops and implements its strategy, and helps to regulate employees' action. A strong, healthy culture is a powerful asset and can be used to facilitate strategy implementation (Simmons, 2007). The strategic leader has much role to play in this. Due to its nature, it is not possible to manage culture in the same way as, for example, a production process. However, it is possible to help shape an organisation's culture. The management team bears the responsibility of setting the tone for the institution through the values they espouse, the behaviours they reward, and most importantly, through the recurring communication of the type of culture they wish to see evolve in the school environment. The team is also in the position to create the selection and promotional policies and criteria that can promote the desired behaviours.

Emphasising Ethical Practices

The effectiveness and implementation of strategies improves when based on strong ethical foundations and in a culture that promotes ethical behaviours. In the absence of such an ethical culture, staff and management may act opportunistically, taking advantage of their positions to benefit themselves. To create and ensure a strong ethical ethos, management must themselves set an excellent ethical example. They must also build a compliance and enforcement process around ethical behaviour. For example, the team could:

- Develop and communicate a code of ethics;
- Provide ethics training to employees;
- Form an ethics committee to give guidance on ethics matters;
- Openly encourage employees to report possible infractions.

Taking ethical issues seriously can be beneficial to the institution in so many ways. It could lead to:

- Increased motivation of employees;
- Attracting higher calibre talent;
- Enhanced reputation in the marketplace that will attract high patronage (national and international).

The Visionary Leader

Envisioning is an attribute which must be possessed by the visionary leader. The Visionary Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles, the leader sees more than others see, sees farther than others see, and sees before others do (Parry & Bryman, 2006). Regardless of the particular leadership traits or styles that a leader adopts or skills that are acquired, having a vision is a must. No one can be a leader without followers, and no one will follow someone unless it is clear where the leader is headed. That direction comes from a vision, which is an ideal and unique image of the future. It articulates a view of the future as the leader sees it, a future condition that would be better in some important ways than what currently exists.

Visions come to those who have a well-informed and open mind, which is prepared by a lifetime of learning and experience. Although a leader does not have to predict the future in order to develop a vision but the more that leader is keenly aware of emerging trends and developments that impact a community and its organizations, the more likely that such a leader will have a reasonable understanding of the range and nature of possible future scenarios. Leaders have both the ability and responsibility to read trends and to look at what is happening at the current time, and then to discern not only where the organization has been but also where it is headed. This puts the leader and his or her organization in a much better position to build flexibility and a quick response capability into what is envisioned for the organization.

The leader's own belief in and enthusiasm for the vision becomes a source of inspiration for others. The leader's own belief in and enthusiasm for the vision is the source of inspiration for others. A truly inspirational leadership shows people how the vision can directly benefit them,

how their specific needs can be satisfied, how the vision can directly benefit them, how their specific needs can be satisfied. One way to ensure that vision formation is a continuous process is by spreading the leadership role throughout the organization at every level, so that every operating unit is encouraged to develop its own vision. Visioning is an ongoing dynamic process if it is to be kept alive and meaningful (Kolwoz, 2014).

Strategic Thinking

A strategy is only as good as the vision that guides it (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Because the economic and social environment keeps changing, adaptive strategic leaders are the ones who can thrive in that uncertainty. Strategic leadership in institutions of learning is more than sitting around and visioning the future. Such leaders get their institutions to focus and to become involved primarily in what matters the most: teaching, learning and research. For the strategies to succeed, each institution's leadership must anticipate, create, and guide change, and also create commitment in all members of staff (Granados & Gámez, 2010). Unrealistic ideas about the organization's mission and future would only lead to dissatisfaction and unrealized expectations.

Empowerment

The job of a leader is to build a complementary team, where every strength is made effective and each weakness is made irrelevant (Davis, 2004). However, the reality is that many leaders will not want to share responsibility with others because that will seem like losing some of their authorities and Leaders who are competent enablers learn to think beyond their own interests for the good of the group they are leading. Unfortunately, many leaders still do not see the direct benefits in such behavior. An empowered staff is a committed worker. Workers enjoy a sense of competency and feel that they are learning and improving in such an environment. As they make decisions that most directly affect them, there is this feeling of community and of personal significance making them find meaning in what they are doing.

Clearly, if the leadership of the institution brings out the best in its employees, it is bringing out the best in the institution. Enabling leaders know they cannot achieve institutional excellence on their own (Kolzow, 2014). They learn that when they share leadership, it improves their own capacity to lead. Time can be freed up to do other important things, such as strategic thinking, envisioning, and creating innovative solutions to existing and ongoing problems (Davis & Davis, 2006; Eacott, 2011).

Collaboration

Strategic leaders foster collaboration and build spirited teams (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). They actively involve others. Such Leaders understand that mutual respect sustains extraordinary efforts; hence they strive to create an atmosphere of trust and human dignity. They strengthen others, making each person feel capable and powerful (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The concept of "collaboration" is often discussed as an important aspect of empowerment and enabling (Morrill, 2007). Unfortunately, what passes for a collaborative effort is often less than what is desired. Collaboration is more accurately defined as a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) who work towards common goals by sharing

responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Adams, 2000).

The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision, agree on a common set of goals, and develop a common set of strategies that solve an organizational problem or that advance the achievements of the organization (Eacott, 2008a; 2008b; Davis, 2004). At the heart of collaboration is a trusting relationship among the individuals involved and an effective toward process for working together. Getting brilliant educators is easy; the hard part is getting them to collaborate (Davies, & Davies 2010). Working together collaboratively is not easy because collaborative skills have not been part of our schooling. This has resulted in academic individualism. In the context of a group, this means more challenge in navigating group decision-making and the flow of effective communication. No matter how challenging this could be, it could be practiced. Collaborative work is the backbone of successful schools (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) and with globalization staring us squarely in the face, each institution should research on it so it could be part of its academic culture.

Institutionalizing Effectiveness

The making of a great institution is the entrenchment of leadership and strategic leadership in the life of that institution. They become enduring apparels that are passed on from generation to generation, with each succeeding generation building on the foundation it inherited.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed leadership as process of attaining goals. Although there can be no leadership without a leader, however no matter how proficient and skilled that one individual could be, there can be no success without the complementary services of the skills and competencies of the employees. Hence leadership is the synergizing of the leadership skills and that of the employees' skills for effective performance that results in increased productivity. In the university environment, the Vice Chancellor and the management team have the responsibility of this. It results in effective teaching, learning and research amongst the educators. Students will be committed and other employees will also be committed to their jobs. A strategic leader is one who is calculative, making sure that short term goals are achieved while envisioning for the future. Such a leader ensures strategies are in place and ensures implementation no matter the challenges that may arise. With globalization, digitalisation and continuous increase in technology, our universities need to be strategically placed through strategic leadership.

Recommendations

- Leadership in education is yet to be given the priority it deserves in Nigeria. This paper recommends that there should be leadership institutes for educators in the university system in Nigeria. This becomes expedient as the educators are the leaders and strategic leaders .but those were not their career paths.
- This paper recommends that each university should establish a directorate for leadership in education. The directorate should also plan leadership education programs for

employees and students and such planning should begin far in advance. Opportunities should be created for all to attend forums, participate in workshops, watch relevant and enlightening programs in the institution from time to time.

- Collaborative academic and research efforts at local, national and international levels should be critically examined by each university and fashion out strategies of collaboration nationally and internationally.

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