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Review of Leadership Styles in Higher Education: A theoretical Approach

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Abstract: Leadership is key to the success of any organisation, including higher education institutions. Most studies in higher education leadership confirm that leadership is crucial to improving the governance, learning, teaching, relevance and success of higher education institutions. In recent years, there has been growing interest and research in leaderships models that can be used to effectively lead organisations in this era of increased efficiency and accountability. Higher education institutions have been facing serious challenges due to globalisation and ever-changing political and socio-economic environment which has made leading higher education institutions difficult. There is need for educational institutions to use leadership strategies that takes into account the difficult nature of leadership, organisational complexity of higher education institutions and changing environment in order to help them to meet their needs and challenges of their environment. This paper takes a contemporary look at leadership styles commonly used in higher education and recommend the best approach.

Keywords: Leadership, Higher Education, Leadership Styles.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of effective leadership cannot be overemphasized. Most studies of effective formal leadership have found that leadership is essential to improving the governance, learning, teaching, relevance and success of higher education institutions (Bolden *et al.*, 2009; & Parrish, 2013). According to Leithwood (2007) leadership plays a pivotal role in expediting the development of effective and innovative schools and educational systems that promote quality teaching and learning. Leadership also helps in navigating the ever changing educational environment (Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Higher education institutions (HEI) are complex by nature Teagu (2015) which makes leading them difficult. According to Scott *et al.* (2008) higher education has complex managerial controls and are burned with the responsibility to demonstrate relevance, accountability and benefit for society. Leading higher education is also complicated by the intricate environment in which HEIs are operating in. Khan (2017) notes that the higher education institutions operating environment is complicated by influence from external factors, new technologies for teaching and learning, globalization, and changing student demographics among others. HEIs are also facing pressure from the public which requires news about everything and media that that is always accuses and point figures (Teagu, 2015) and increasing demand from stakeholders for improved performance in the operations of educational institutions (Squires &

Nelson, 2017). Robertson & Webber (2002) observed that the higher education operating environment of today is highly politicised than in the past.

Mukiur *et al.* (2015) also notes that several changes have occurred within the higher education in recent decades due to the globalisation, digital transformation and development of information technology. According to Mukiur *et al.* (2015) these changes necessitate new and effective leadership skills and styles that will enable HEIs to face global challenges, survive and succeed. Some of the notable changes that have occurred in higher education include the cutting of funding by governments, reduction in resources, few contributions by donors in the face of increasing operational costs and economic challenges (Teagu, 2015). This has put financial pressures on university leaders as they should act as fundraisers in addition to their other duties. They also need to understand operational impact of governmental regulations; research and development grant criteria; new technologies; and globalization (Teagu, 2015). Barnes (2015) observed that scarcity of resources and fierce competition for ranking and prestige has further complicated leading HEIs as leaders of these institutions must make tough decisions relating to cutting budgets, freezing pay raises, or eliminating programs.

All these challenges faced by HEIs have generated interest in leadership practices and styles in HEIs. Teagu (2015) advanced that there is need of

leaders with a diverse set of experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds in HEIs who will encourage different perspectives, develop an institution's world views, and foster innovation which is very important in HEIs. Mukiur *et al.* (2015) noted that HEIs need to heighten their leadership as it is crucial for their success and survival. HEIs need leadership strategy that is flexible, supportive and allows them to be responsive to change (Khan, 2017). They must adopt and adapt leadership styles that respond to the new organizational, social and cultural challenges and realities of today's society. According to Mukiur *et al.* (2017) some leadership styles give better results than others depending on the type of organization.

This article therefore seeks to review leadership styles and practices in HEIs and recommend suitable styles. This article begins by discussing the concept of leadership in general and leadership in higher education. Next, various leadership styles found within HEI are described. Finally, conclusions and recommendations about leadership styles are made.

LEADERSHIP

Cole (1990) defined leadership as "a dynamic process within a group, in which an individual influences other to voluntarily contribute to the fulfilment of the groups' tasks, in a given situation". Sharma & Jain (2013) viewed leadership as "a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent". Both these definitions stress influence of a group by one person in order to achieve goals as key components of leadership. Leadership entails promotion of behaviours that nurture the achievement of organisational objectives, motivating the staff, the way in which communication and cooperation are done within the organisation and the staff engagement on decision making (Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015). Avolio *et al.* (2004) stated that leadership can be defined in terms of qualities, characteristics and behaviours that focus on a clear vision, action, ethical relationships, congruence, honesty and teamwork. Leadership is the ability to move people in a direction they are fundamentally uncomfortable going (Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015).

Leadership should not be confused with management although sometimes these terms are used synonymously. While both have been proposed as necessary elements of formal academic governance (Marshall *et al.*, 2011; & Ramsden, 1998), it is important that they are not confused the key factor that distinguishes leadership from management is that management is more formal and institutionalised while leadership can be formal or informal. Druguş & Landoy (2014) points out that leadership refers to a person's capacity to lead by making reference to the natural and spontaneous in-born aspects of the leadership act, while management refers to the act of

administration, the formal, institutional aspects of leading. It is essential for managers to be leaders in order for them to achieve the desired results and strategy of an organisation. Kurniawan & Puspitaningtyas (2013) notes that management is something that can be learned while leadership cannot be learned, it is something that must be accepted. To further illustrate the difference between leadership and management, Druguş & Landoy (2014) distinguishes the manager from the leader. They point out that the "manager" tends to focus on analytical, structured, controlled, deliberate, ordered, while the "leader" tends to focus on the: visionary, experimental, flexible and creative aspects of the business. According to Bryman (2007), managers are inward focused and seek to ensure the rules and policies are followed by staff, and to manage grievances while leaders on the other hand are outward looking and have institutional credibility in order to create positive work environments for staff. In addition to having traits of great managers such as motivating and inspiring, leaders are also optimistic, enthusiastic and articulate when talking about plans, hopes, and successes (Kurniawan & Puspitaningtyas, 2013).

Leadership in Higher Education

The nature of leadership in higher education has always been contested because of the organizational complexity of the university, its multiple goals and its traditional values (Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015). According to Juntrasook (2014) as cited by Hofmeyer *et al.*, (2015) there are contested meanings of leadership in higher education that need to be understood and considered and these are: leadership as position; leadership as performance; leadership as practice; and leadership as professional role.

Leadership as a practice focuses on the everyday practice of leadership including its moral, emotional, and relational aspects, as opposed to its rational, objective, and technical ones (Carroll *et al.*, 2008). Leadership as a practice is more about what people can accomplish together than what one individual can do. It does not focus on traits and behaviours of individuals. Rather, it is associated with terms such as shared, distributed and collective. Leadership as a practice helps practitioners to understand and reflect on their own actions and, consequently, better able to reconstruct their activity in light of their reflections and on behalf of their mutual interest (Raelin, 2011).

Leadership as a position requires one to manage people, situations, and items effectively and ethically (Glassdoor Team, 2021). People who hold certain positions or do certain roles in an organisation are regarded as leaders. Leadership positions and roles can either be formal or informal. Cook (2016) notes that there are a number of leadership roles/positions in each HEI and they include positions such as Vice Chancellor,

Heads of Schools and Directors of professional services. While the leadership structures in each institution may vary, each institution has clearly defined leadership roles and actives and individuals who occupy these positions see themselves in leadership positions (Bryman, 2007). As leaders, these position holders influence others using their abilities, influence, and title to help the institution progress. However, some are of view that holding a position or role is not the same as leadership. A study by Bolden (2012) found that there is no connection between the leadership activities of role/position holders and their day to day work. Formal leadership actually inhibits their work rather than facilitate it.

Leadership in higher education is divided into formal and informal leadership. Formal leadership has significant influence in determining how teaching workloads are distributed, adjusted and rewarded (Bryman, 2007; & Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015) and influences the work culture and the productivity of HEIs (Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015). Formal leadership is intertwined with management of HEIs and they complement each other in ensuring that governance and administrative functions are achieved (Bryman, 2007). On the other hand, leadership in learning and teaching only matters for promotion and student experience, but there is limited incentive, recognition or legitimacy in the culture to develop leadership skills in this area of academic scholarship (Hofmeyer *et al.*, 2015). In entails coordinating large teaching teams and mentoring students, colleagues and casual tutors.

Traditionally, leadership in higher education has been dictatorial and hierarchical. One of the most classical approaches associated to higher education institutions are the authority, power and structure (Mukiur *et al.*, 2017). However, there is an emerging view that leadership is everyone's responsibility (Bolden *et al.*, 2008) and this had led to the development of new leaderships styles which are collective and promote sharing of responsibilities. (Jones *et al.*, 2012). There have been call for more relevant democratic cultures and less hierarchical models of leadership. In HEIs.

Leadership Styles in Higher Education

Leaderships models and traits required by leaders to effectively lead organisations in this era of increased efficiency and accountability continue to be the subject of considerable research and discussion (Cuddy *et al.*, 2013). The recent interest in the higher education literature about leadership is in response to calls for in more relevant democratic cultures and less hierarchical models of leadership (Jones *et al.*, 2012). Various leadership models and styles can be found in higher education. They include distributed leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, adaptive leadership, situational leadership, servant leadership, democratic leadership among others.

Various empirical and theoretical studies have been done to evaluate the effectiveness of this leadership styles. In this study we will review distributed leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership and adaptive leadership.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is considered to be the most preferred normative model of school leadership (Shava *et al.*, 2021). Distributed leadership is a conceptual and analytical approach to understanding how the work of leadership takes place among the people and in context of a complex organization. It also helps to examine the daily leadership and management practices rather than dwelling on leaders and leadership structures, functions and roles. Thus DL, particularly in the educational organization, take leadership activity as the unit of analysis where we find multiple actors, teachers, learners and other stakeholders participating in leadership and managing (Spillane, 2006).

Distributed leadership (DL) refers to leadership that is shared and distributed between and across organizational members (Harris, 2013). The focus of distributive leadership is on 'collective collaboration rather than individual power and control' to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching (Jones *et al.*, 2012). DL has theoretical foundations in activity theory and distributed cognition and this implies that leadership activities should be viewed as a situated and social process at the intersection of leaders, followers and the situation (Shava *et al.*, 2021). It focuses on various roles that provide forms of leadership throughout the school system, including teacher leadership, democratic leadership, shared leadership, or collaborative leadership. According to Spillane (2006) DL sits at the intersection of psychology, sociology, and cognitive science. It is essentially the theory that knowledge and the thinking with that knowledge are stretched across the tools, situation, other people, and context.

At its core, DL involve two aspects, the leader plus aspect and the practice aspects. The leader plus aspect focuses on the work of all individuals who have a hand in leadership and management practice rather than just those in formally designated leadership roles. On the other hand, the practice aspect is concerned with the outcomes of interactions among the leaders, followers and the situation over time (Shava *et al.*, 2021).

DL has practices in higher education have been associated with positive benefits, directly and indirectly. In particular, DL has positive effects on school performance and student's achievements. According to Harris (2012) various studies have found a positive relationship between DL and various aspects of school performance. For example, Mujis (2005); Leithwood *et al.* (2008); Lumby (2013); Spillane (2013); &Hall

(2013) found positive impact of DL on school performance, student performance and teaching and learning among other various aspects of educational systems. However, DL is without criticism. According to Nelson & Squires (2017), DL puts much emphasis on distributing work of leadership among formal and informal leadership without paying attention on the fundamental complex issues of the organization. Also the model ignores the collaborative efforts required for difficult problem-solving.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is leadership which aims to motivate and inspire the followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes, and simultaneously develop a follower's leadership potential (Sashkin, 2004). It involves shifts in the beliefs, the needs, and the values of followers (Bensimon *et al.*, 1989). According to Avolio *et al.* (1999), transformational leadership has four dimensions which are: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These leader attributes motivate followers to go above and beyond their capabilities to perform excellently (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) reconsider their fundamental values and a willingness to sacrifice their own interests for collective good (Kark & Shamir, 2013; & Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Groves & LaRocca (2010) notes that transformational leaders are associated with doing what is "morally right" and protecting the rights and dignities of individuals, exhibit higher perceived integrity and ethical behaviour. They are also inclined to foster organisational climate focusing on diversity, inclusivity, and social responsibility (Brown *et al.*, 2019) by persuading followers to believe that that managing diversity is the right thing to do and not just a matter of legal compliance (Leonard & Grebler, 2006). Transformational leaders champion social justice, prioritise protecting the welfare of all individuals in society and ensuring the fair treatment of all people in their actions (Hood, 2003). Thus transformational leaders make efforts for managing diversity.

Some empirical studies have argued that transformational leadership is ideal in higher education compared to other styles such as transactional leadership styles (Mukiur *et al.*, 2017) because it improves degree of satisfaction, perceived work performance and organisational commitment to tasks. Also, Bensimon (1993) found that transformational leadership increases morale and build satisfaction among faculty and staff. Aguirre Jr & Martinez (2006) found transformational leadership to be suitable in situations where leaders want to expand college campuses as it will help them to empower and motivate others, develop trust and working needed to transform the values and preferences of organizational culture. Thus transformational leadership helps to bring change

by helping people to rethink their values. Al-husseini & Elbeltagi (2018) also observed that transformational leadership promotes knowledge sharing and fosters the culture of trust, cooperation, and encouragement. Transformational leadership is also without criticism. Currie & Locket (2007) argued that transformational leadership does not take the institutional context within which educational institutions operate.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership style is characterized by leaders emphasizing compliance on followers with the use of both rewards and punishment. These leaders exercise authority and power in the firm, and they are also known for prioritizing tasks assignments, and monitoring work standards (Bass, 1985; & Sashkin, 2004). Further, the transactional leader takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of something that is valued (Bensimon *et al.*, 1989). Just like transformational leadership, transactional leadership is also connected with the leader's moral and ethical orientation and transactional leaders favour procedural justice (Brown *et al.*, 2019). Transaction leaders, alternatively, are focused on following the rules so their approach to diversity management may be driven with the necessity to abide by the laws (Hood, 2003). Transactional leadership is instrumental in developing the infrastructure of the organization, its capacity, and resources (Bensimon, 1993).

Some researchers, Birnbaum (1992) among them, have advanced that transactional leadership is suitable for the higher education environment because of the prevalent bureaucracy and it's most likely to be effective because of the ambiguous goals and decentralized structures of HEIs. Wolverton & Gmelch (2002) argues that the hierarchical structure, reward systems, and tenure promotion process of HEIs make transactional leadership conducive to higher education systems. Also, the focus on social exchange of transactional leadership makes it suitable to HEIs. Bensimon *et al.* (1989) contends that transactional leadership allows HEI leaders to accumulate and exert power by controlling access to information, controlling the budgetary process, allocating resources to preferred projects, and assessing major faculty and administrative appointments. Thus, transactional leadership takes into account the organisational structure of HEIs. Further, transactional leadership strengthens the decision making process in HEIs since leaders can democratically execute their activities and value the contributions of participants.

However, while transactional leadership is highly recommended for higher education setups, Khan (2017) argues that its effectiveness has been questioned as it cannot motivate followers beyond the initial goals set for them. Also, it does not consider the internal and

external environment which is very crucial to higher education leadership.

Adaptive Leadership

This is a leadership style which considers all factors that affect an organization and involves properly planning for a changing world. Adaptive leadership involves identifying the problems, defining them carefully, finding appropriate solutions (Khan, 2017) and changing behaviour in fitting ways as the situation changes (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). It entails carefully identifying potential changes in the external environment within which leaders and followers operate (Glover *et al.*, 2002) and then choosing the best option that will positively affect the organization (Khan, 2017). It also involves mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and flourish (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

At its core, adaptive leadership challenges beliefs, values, and norms and this may lead individuals to resist the ideas and changes that emerge from an adaptive leadership approach (Yukl, 2010). Adaptive leadership approach useful and valid in dynamic societies (Khan, 2017). Adaptive leadership is a practice of influencing change that enables the capacity of individuals and the organization to develop new capabilities and strategies to address challenges in the environment and realize strategic visions and goals (Wolinski, 2010). Thus adaptive leadership is a holistic approach to leadership which focuses on both the leader-follower relationship and environmental issues (Khan, 2017). Yukl & Mahsud (2010) points that even though this theory is effective for organizations planning for change, many organizations are actually resistant to an adaptive leadership approach.

CONCLUSION

Various researchers have argued for and against various leadership styles in higher education. For example, Jones *et al.* (2012); & Bolden *et al.* (2012) argue that HEIs needs a less hierarchical approach which will take account of the specialised and professional nature of academic staff. They argue that academic profession is characterised by autonomy which is not common in other professions. This means that leadership styles like transformational leadership and distributed leadership are the most ideal leadership styles suited to higher education. Khan (2017) advocated for adaptive leadership in higher education because it is flexible, takes into account current complexities, and is highly motivating for followers. The flexibility of adaptive leadership style provides it with a framework to respond to demands for change and the changing environment of higher education, in particular, the decreased funding, globalisation and student demographics. Wolverton & Gmelch (2002) found that leadership style varied by the type of institution; with research-oriented institutions used transactional leadership while teaching-focused state institutions favoured transformational leadership style.

In this paper, we argue that there is no single leadership style best suited for HEIs. Leaders should decide which style to use depending on the structure of their organisation and the environment there are operating in. No single leadership style can address the complexities of HEIs and their challenging and changing operating environment. Each leadership style is effective in certain circumstances but not in all circumstances. Sometimes, there is need to blend leadership styles depending on the complexities of organisational structure and challenges presented by the operating environment. Therefore, leaders should carefully analyse several contextual factors before deciding on the leadership style to use. However, it is important that leadership chooses leadership styles that are effective in promoting effective relationships, diversity and team work which is required in higher education. Also, leaders should consider styles that can easily address change and incorporate both the internal and external environment.

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