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Leader Transparency and Positive Work Climate in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The growing discontent, conflict and strive within most institutions in Nigeria is considered worrisome, indicating apparent lapses in the leadership of these institutions. While evidence of such challenges can be attributed to a variety of contextual and organizational factors, yet still, some are symptoms of the work climate of the organization. Given the implications of work climate on the functionality and wellbeing of the organization, this paper reviewed literature on the relationship between leader transparency and positive work climate. A congruence of studies suggest that leader transparency contributes towards trust, collaboration and improved work relations within the workplace; invariably this also enhances the positive perceptions workers hold of their work. In conclusion, it is affirmed that the practice of leader transparency impacts on workers perceptions of their work, working conditions and their organizations; thereby enhancing the positive work climate of the organization.*

Keywords: Leader transparency, positive work climate, trust, accountability, collaboration, organizational embeddedness

INTRODUCTION

Experiences and perceptions leave deep impressions on individuals. The interpretations of events and the generality of views about events can either serve to inspire, and motivate or likewise, discourage. Within Nigerian institutions (private and public), work climate, has been known to impact on the commitment, satisfaction, morale and engagement of staff (Aluko, 2007; Ongori, 2007). This is as a great deal of the workers behaviour and inclinations are considered a reflection of their experiences as well as their interpretations of the events, attitudes and actions of others within their workplaces, especially their leaders (Javed, Balouch & Hassan, 2014). Studies (Hughes, 2005; Bennis, Goleman & O'Toole, 2008) have consistently, highlighted the need for values such as leader transparency within workplaces, drawing on its trust implications in enhancing workplace relations, and collaboration. Such transparency in leadership would also provide the necessary clarifications required for clearer perspectives or interpretations of events and activities within the work environment; and as such positively impact on the work climate.

Ekvall (1996) described work climate as the collective appraisal of work-related events. It is an organizational level construct as it deals with the generality of views, or shared interpretations of events. A work climate can be negative in the sense that it is exploitative, overbearing and alienating; while on the other hand, positive because it is inclusive, supportive, motivating and encouraging. The work climate can have a strong effect on the workers sense of placement and trust for the institution. This is because most individuals, define and view themselves based on self-categorizations such as those afforded by the institutions where they work, and where they spend the most part of their lives; hence their experiences within such institutions can have a significant effect on the way their self confidence and sense of worth (Ekall, 1996; Thakor & Joshi, 2005). In this vein, the concept of work climate offers not only a base for understanding the "weather" of the workplace, but also the serves as a pointer to how a large number of lives within societies are shaped.

While the clamour for positive work climate in Nigeria has continued to rise over the past decades (Akinyele, 2010), studies (Ongori, 2007; Asmui, Hussin & Paino, 2012) have consistently linked poor work outcomes (within both public and private sector organizations) to not only the unfavourable work conditions but also the high level of corruption within Nigerian organizations, which has for years crippled various facets of the Nigerian economy (Aniele, 2004). This is as Akinyele (2010) opined institutions are predominantly a reflection of their leadership. In his opinion, the leadership of institutions are responsible for shaping, moulding and driving the institution in the direction of its goals and objectives. Consequently, incidences of poor relations, lack of trust, and low workers morale are as noted, attributable to the forms of leadership and the behaviour of leaders. Similarly, Ogunbameru (2004) observed that when leadership is transparent, accountable, inclusive and able to effectively communicate its agenda clearly and unambiguously, then there is a higher tendency for trust, collaboration and quality relations between leaders and their subordinates.

While a host of studies on positive work climate have addressed the leadership factor as a possible antecedent, the preferred angle has often bothered on concepts such as leadership styles, leadership competencies or leader emotional intelligence (Kochan & Robinstein, 2000; Van Knippenberg, De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2007; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011). The few studies which have addressed transparency as a possible antecedent to positive work climate offer scarce content on the relationship between the variables given their focus on a much broader scope; that of ethical leadership. Nonetheless, leadership transparency is a unique attribute of the ethical leader which has its own implications quite distinct from other facets of ethics such as integrity, equity and benevolence. The growing conflicts, corruption and grievances within Nigerian workplaces are such that call for a more detailed assessment of leader transparency and its role in enhancing positive work climate. This paper therefore theoretically examines the relationship between the variables.

Theoretical foundation (Organizational embeddedness)

The theoretical foundation adopted for this paper is the organizational embeddedness theory (Granovetter, 1985). The theory identifies the position of the organization as a microcosm of the larger society and social framework. According to the organizational embeddedness theory, organizations are a reflection of the traits and characteristics that prevail within their contexts, and as such perform better when they imbibe and emphasize on such characteristics. Some studies have overtime adapted this to the individual level of analysis, describing the behaviour and actions of the employee or staff from the job embeddedness theory (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001).

The organizational embeddedness theory describes outcomes and economic activities of organizations as being subject to other non-economic and social factors within its social and even cultural environment. Its assumptions follow that the internal relations within the workplace and the behaviour of the organization is defined by the social dynamics, values, traditions and norms that define its operational context. According to Granovetter (1985), embeddedness refers to the contextualization of economic activities within social structures. Within the context of Nigeria, studies (Yesufu, 1984; Aniele, 2004) admit to the growing level of corruption and workers exploitation; these factors are as noted by Obasi (2003) are connected with the deterioration in societal values, norms and ethics. Consequently, work relationships are considered reflections of external events and to a large extent are encouraged by the trends and practices within the environment of the organization.

By implication, the theory of organizational embeddedness offers a descriptive understanding of the factors which drive poor leadership practices within most Nigerian organizations (Aniele, 2004). The high tolerance level for corruption and unethical practices within the macro environment are such that impede and affect the economic activities within such a context. Consequently, the need for transparency in leadership is watered down primarily due to the lack of fear of repercussions for unethical actions or behaviour. On the same note, management practices that are exploitative of their workforce, and which are abusive, oppressive and alienating are considered as a norm, hence there is a demoralizing effect on workers which further moulds their perceptions or views of the workplace as being negative (Yesufu, 1984; Asmui et al, 2012).

Leader Transparency

The leader according to Van Knippenberg et al (2007) is that individual saddled with the responsibility of delivering group or organizational level results (Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Yukl, 2010). The concern of the leader is therefore one which addresses the harmonization of efforts, as well as the effective utilization and application of the organization's resources in the achievement of its goals. This implies that leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of managing and efficiently applying the resources of the organization. Studies (Kochan & Robinstein, 2000; Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007) indicate that most often the function of resource utilization or application tends to be central when addressing stakeholders' issues, especially those of the workers. Thus, leader transparency is a fundamental factor in understanding relations, trust outcomes and the overall health of the organization.

Leader transparency, according to Berggren and Bernshteyn (2007) is a process. This is because it involves several activities or a consistency in the activities of the leader as being open, willing to face criticism, and as enabling a participative form of leadership. Patel, Balic, and Bwakira (2002) defined leader transparency of that behaviour of the leader that identifies and recognizes the need for clarity and accountability in their actions and in their relationship with others. However, the need and emphasis on transparency is highly relative and is justified on basis that the individual has the acceptance and support of the majority and as such is accountable to his group or followers. Such a view does not apply within an authoritarian framework or dispensation but is considered a norm within the democratic workplace (Garcia, 2002).

One major reason leader transparency is important is also based on its unequivocal dependence on followership (Yukl, 2010). The need for leadership is primarily latched unto the need to organize, control and direct. Without followers, the concept of leadership loses its essence. Likewise, without leaders, groups have no central position, voice or direction (Yukl, 2010). This interrelationship between the parties offers a strong basis for transparency, and identifies workers as stakeholders with a right to being informed of decisions or actions that may impact on their wellbeing and work within the organization. As such both parties are interdependent and can affect the features or content of their relations in either a positive or negative way. Leader transparency therefore informs and updates the worker or follower of the leader's activities which bother on the use and application of resources. Not only does this assure the workers of the leader's sincerity towards all concerned parties, it also establishes the leader as being trustworthy and capable to handling the responsibilities bestowed upon him or her.

Leader transparency is therefore imperative in enhancing organizational outcomes such as trustworthiness, employee commitment, and employee support (Bushman, Piotroski & Smith, 2004; Davis, Schoorman, Mayer; and Tan, 2000; Fleischmann & Wallace, 2005). Transparency in leadership also facilitates increased collaboration and bonding between leaders and their followers (Hannan, Polos & Carroll, 2003). Research (Gabarro, 1978) on transparency describes the concept as being consistent with the leader accountability; implying that leaders who are transparent are also responsible and tend to be efficient in their use of the organization's resources. In this vein leader transparency therefore contributes in several ways, some of which are: (a) building the reputation of the leader as one that is responsible, (b) enhancing the trustworthiness of the organization, (c) increasing the level of collaboration within the workplace, (d) enhancing workers organizational identification, and (e) improving stakeholders relationship and correspondence. As such leader transparency can be described as portending improved organizational mortality and growth (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000).

Positive Work Climate

Organizations offer individuals a wide range of opportunities. Most individuals find meaning, placement and a sense of responsibility based on their membership of organizations. Their work in such organizations offer them a sense of pride, purpose and enhances their self-worth (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans & May, 2004). However, for such improved levels of self-worth and purpose, individuals hold certain expectations of their work, the working conditions and their organization. Most often their expectations may differ substantially from their actual experiences within the organization. In such an event, feelings of disappoint or dissatisfaction may occur, whereas when expectations are matched or exceeded by the organization, workers tend to be more satisfied with their roles. As such, a good number of workers are subject to the climate or general perception of the nature of work in the organization which identifies with the earlier noted characteristics of the work, the working conditions and the organization itself. This is as Jones and George (1998) noted that workers often perceive their work in terms of the shared views and experiences of others within the same organization.

The study of climate has often been negated to the background due to the prevalence of studies on culture, which some consider as sharing similar attributes. Yet, there exists substantial difference between climate and culture (Balker, 2015; Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000). While culture describes the shared beliefs, rituals, norms and values of a particular group, climate describes the general perceptions and views held by the group. In this sense the culture defines the group and shapes their behaviour, choices and how they relate with others, while climate is the opinion held about the group. Both concepts have strong implications on the worker and organization. Climate is also considered as more fluid that culture, with the latter affirmed as being more engrained within the social facets and dynamics of the organization (Ashkanasy et al, 2015).

Positive work climate refers to the positive perceptions and interpretations of the work, working conditions and the organization held by most of the workers themselves (Balker, 2015; Hashmi & Sadegi, 2016). It is described by Balker (2015) as the weather of the organization and implies the positive views of workers with respect to work features such as the timing of work, the relationship between supervisors and subordinates, compensation packages, workspaces etc. Positive work climate is important because it affects the workers behaviour in terms of satisfaction, trust in management and commitment to the job. It also has overall implications on the performance and health of the organization. Balker (2015) stated that positive work climate is necessary for organizational effectiveness and longevity, especially since there is a reduced level of turnover and workers are committed and identify with the organization. This suggests that the perceptions workers have of their work determines their future plans with the organization.

In their study Javed et al (2014) revealed that positive work climate can also be premised not only on the content of the work or its features alone, but also on the forms of justice and recognition of the rights and privileges of the worker. It demonstrates that workers also consider their position and the extent to which they are treated fairly as important in their assessment of their work. In Nigeria Aluko (2007) noted that there is a growing disconnect between workers and their work.

This according to the authors is linked to their perceptions of insecurity, lack of support, and injustice experienced within their work places. Most Nigerian organizations as noted by Aniele (2004) are highly exploitative and capitalize on the inequalities of the labour market to engage workers in highly disadvantageous that stifle the rights and voice of their staff. Some others prefer engaging them on contract basis which offers no benefits or actual recognition within the status of the organization. These factors have contributed negatively towards work climate in Nigeria and to this extent have mitigated the health and effectiveness of most organizations.

Leader Transparency and Positive Work Climate

Akinyele (2007) argued that within the context of Nigeria, the internal relations and exchanges within the organization are defined and affected by extraneous factors; some of these factors include the political, legal and social dynamics of the region. In some situations, the position of leadership and its activities are either strengthened by such extraneous factors or constantly appraised by same factors to ensure it is responsible. This aligns with the embeddedness theory (Nee, 1998; Oliver, 1990) and highlights the impetus of leadership based on their assumed affiliations with "higher powers" external to the organization or their victimization by such powers especially when they (leaders) are considered as outgroup members. Nonetheless, the activities of leaders, despite their affiliations, are often interpreted by organizational stakeholders, which can generate controversy, opposition and strive (Obasi, 2003). Despite their affiliations, organizational progress can be stifled and its activities jeopardized by members of the organization who feel cheated, marginalized, side-lined or disregarded; thus, the embedded interpretations of what is right or wrong also matters (Obasi, 2003). In this vein, leader transparency enriches the trust levels and participation of key members in the running of the organization, and thereby assures members of the leader's truthfulness. As earlier noted, the relationship between the concepts (leader transparency and positive work climate) is rooted (embedded) within the context of the societal norms, values and practices of the operational context of the organization (Baum & Oliver, 1992; Davis & Powell, 1993). This implies that while most of the actions and behaviour of leadership are drawn from what is considered as applicable and common place within the society, the interpretations of such actions and behaviour are also based on what is generally considered as acceptable and required within the same society. Ongori (2007) observed that workers in Nigeria have high expectations of their jobs and of their progress in life through such jobs. They also tend to appreciate recognition, and platforms that afford them a sense of relevance within their workplaces. Actions that alienate or are oppressive towards them often lowers their morale and sense of belonginess to the organization. Ogunbameru (2004) in their study noted that most public agencies and parastatals in Nigeria constantly contend with workers commitment levels and poor productivity due to their perceptions of the work as being alien to them. Reports (Akinyele, 2010) also suggest that most Nigerian workers do not trust their organizations and consider every opportunity to "look out for themselves" within the workplace; hence the intense corruption, embezzlement and abuse of public offices and roles.

Furthermore, the interpretations of the system and the prevailing work conditions within the work context of Nigeria, are some of the factors which have contributed towards the negative work climate. The general evidence and workers experiences of inconsistencies in salary payments, gross misconduct of directors and administrators, high rate of redundancy within some sectors, failed pension schemes and programs as well as the outright misappropriation of funds and resources, have contributed towards poor work behaviour and trust in the leadership of most Nigerian organizations (Akinyele, 2010). Most of these perceptions of the general public have shaped the attitudes and orientation of most individuals even before their recruitment or employment within the system. This is as Akkermans et al (2004) affirmed that the responsibility of change and positive organizational outcomes lies with the leadership of any organization. Their actions, with regards to transparency, have strong implications for the work climate, and as such, the behaviour and attitudes of the workers. Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy (2001) advised that leadership should be more concerned with the process of leading than in the outcome of leading, because, according to them, the process defines the outcome and to a significant extent determines the level of satisfaction and assurance members of the organization experience in their relationship and dealings with their leader (Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011; Vogelgesang, & Crossley, 2006).

Conclusion and implications

Leader transparency offers a wide range of benefits to organizations. While its necessity is well acknowledged in research, its practicality within the context of Nigeria is evidently low, contributing further to the degeneration of most Nigerian workplace relations and thereby negative work climate. In this manner, leader transparency is imperative for improved workplace relations; thus, contributing towards positive work climate. On this basis, it is concluded that the practice of leader transparency impacts on workers perceptions of their work, working conditions and their organizations; thereby enhancing the positive work climate of the organization. The implications of the conclusions follow that transparency enhances the perceptions of leader accountability and openness towards appraisal and criticism, thus facilitating workers trust in leadership. As such it offers managers, supervisors and other heads of agencies an avenue through which they can build the stronger correspondence with their stakeholders and at the same enhance their trustworthiness. It can also be utilized as a means of dispelling gossips, reducing rumour mongering and strengthening of the reputation of the managers or leaders within the organization.

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