

The Challenges of Knowledge Age and Transformational Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract :- This study is intended to explore the concept of ‘challenges’ in the context of workplace with specific attention to higher education institutions through the industrial era, knowledge age, and the present globalisation time. Similarly, with the philosophy that the greater the quality of leadership, the higher the possibility of an institution to overcome its challenges, this paper decides to examine how to address these challenges from the leadership point of view by theorising the various approaches of organisational transformation and organisational leadership, their characteristics, and types with a case study on how these theories, characteristics, and types can remarkably transform organisations from challenges into success and contextualise their application to higher education institutions towards a better educational system for sustainable tomorrow.

Keywords: Challenges, Workplace, Change, Knowledge, Transformation, Higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘challenges’ in the context of the workplace is probably the most commonly used concept when providing descriptions that pertain to specific corporations and organisations. However, not too many people are aware that in higher education institutions, the term ‘challenges’ equally applies in this globalised age (Senge, 2000). The rapid transformation of higher education institutions from the industrial age to the knowledge age is a natural product of globalisation. The sudden boom of technologies is fuelled by the globalisation phenomenon that has widely affected many different countries worldwide, which triggered major changes in the way higher education institutions operate. The move from the industrial to post-industrial era, also called the ‘knowledge era’, requires a different perspective of seeing and making sense of the world (Drucker, 1994). The main challenge in the present knowledge age is the adaption to change. This change is revolutionary and massive to the point of totally transforming various social and economic relationships, both in the corporate and educational contexts (Drucker, 1994). Many change factors raised pertinent questions for the higher education institutions, new knowledge perspectives created controversies, and the existing higher education institutional structures experienced challenges in meeting the demands of the knowledge era (Hargreaves, 1994). Higher education institutions, at present, are undoubtedly experiencing a huge transition between two

different eras and unfortunately, the transition process involves numerous challenges that continue to multiply as the full transition process into a global knowledge era progresses (Senge, 2000).

Senge (2000) raised a very important point with regard to why resistance to change or slow response to change is predominant among higher education institutions: the lack of competition. Many higher education institutions which are already established have the tendency to fall into the trap of lack of innovation as triggered by the lack of competition in the educational environment. Such institutions do not see the urgency for them to innovate which is why in this knowledge era, many educational societies remain in the traditional mindset of teaching and running higher education institutions. Very few are willing to make the necessary changes to further improve the quality of the educational systems and strategies within the organisation. This observation witnessed by Senge (2000) is quite true because it appears some institutions feel the need to change or innovate. For instance, in many approaches and strategies to teaching, there is a constant need to adapt to the learning needs of the students. Using more advanced technologies inside the classroom would fire up the interest of the students. However, some institutional policies do not allow this. Since then, although there is a need to change and constantly innovate to improve the teaching and learning process at least for the benefit of the students, there are institutions that are not open to such ‘changes’, which also make it not that urgent.

For this reason, Senge (2000) stated that the path towards total transformation of the industrial age mindset with respect to learning and education is a rough road. The fact is that living through these times is not at all that easy because it entails challenging our own insights and ideas that are meaningful to us or in some cases. The process even entails totally throwing to the trash some of the practices that have been commonly applied and implemented in higher education institutions. There are many industrial age assumptions that are still embedded in the operation and current practices of the present higher education institutions in terms of teaching and learning and structures. For example, one clear mark of the industrial age mindset that is still applied in some institutions is the belief that ‘learning takes place in the classroom and not in the

world' (Senge, 2000). For institutions, the classroom is the centre of learning and taking the students out of the classroom is a big distraction to learning on the part of the students. Certainly, this assumption may have been true for students in the past, but not today wherein students' attention and interest are harder to gain.

Another industrial age concept that is still deeply embedded in the institutions is what Senge (2000) refers to as the 'paradigm of smart students and dumb students'. The author strongly opposes this kind of mindset and as much as possible, avoids differentiating students who appear to be 'smarter' than the others. However, the institutions insist that the focus of learning must only be on the 'smart ones' as opposed to teaching rigorously both the 'smart' and the 'dumb' students. For many institutions, the smart ones are always recognised. They are the ones who are allowed to lead the various student organisations in the institutions. They are the ones who are placed in positions of responsibility while the 'dumb' students act as their followers. The sole basis for selecting these 'smart' students is their grade points and general average. This system is quite dangerous because instead of reaching out to what the institutions called as the 'dumb' students, these students become even more alienated by the higher education institutions. This is one of the reasons why as an academic, the author strongly opposes even the most common industrial age concepts of learning. Clearly, institutions need to focus more on preparing their students for the future challenges that the economic and social environment may offer. The need to depart from the classroom-centred view on learning has to be reinforced and the segregation of the smart students from the not-so-smart kids also needs to be eliminated. They need to be equipped with both the technical and non-technical knowledge and skills. They need to be flexible enough to survive and thrive in their future careers and professions (Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010). For the higher education institutions to accomplish this, the institutions themselves need to let go of their traditional industrial age mindset and begin embracing the knowledge age concept of learning. The following sections will provide a detailed explanation of the approaches to organisation's transformational leadership as well a case study with applications of such approaches in tackling workplace challenges which are practical for higher education.

II. ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION APPROACHES TO WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

The road towards transforming an organisation is one of the toughest challenges that higher education institutions currently face (Salihu, 2019). This is because transforming an organisation means more than simply improving how the organisation works. It involves the total improvement of the current practices of the organisation (Fletcher, 1990). Transformative changes also entail the adoption of completely new ways or methods of thinking, behaving, and perceiving by each of the member of the organisation (Waddell, 2004). This may be achieved by utilising organisational

transformation strategies that would help the organisation become more flexible and responsive to the internal and external environments. The organisational transformation strategies basically target the transformation of the organisation's core vision and mission (Fletcher, 1990).

'Lufthansa's transformation marathon: Process of liberating and focusing change energy' by Bruch and Sattelberger (2001) proved to be a great example of a successful organisational transformation strategy. Lufthansa almost went bankrupt in 1991 but 10 years later, it has successfully attained the status as of the world's most profitable airline companies. It is also a member of the Star Alliance. The key to Lufthansa's success is that it has undergone an ongoing change that centred on its people. Lufthansa as an organisation started applying the core elements of empowering people by means of the following: a) providing space for reflection and dialogue among its organisational members, b) continuously building networks of change actors, c) creating durable platforms for emotional mobilisation, and d) reflection on action (Bruch & Sattelberger, 2001). The trigger point of such important changes in the organisation was none other than the bankruptcy and huge losses that Lufthansa experienced in 1991. This brought about an organisation-wide urgency to begin a large-scale redevelopment process in the entire company which involved the act of building a new, stronger network of 'change-minded' managers that would drive the change process internally within the organisation. The company even formed what was called the 'OPS Team' (Operations Team) which initiated specific actions that defined concrete activities and promoted constant monitoring, advising, and supporting of line managers in the company that checked the roles and accomplishments of the managers (Bruch & Sattelberger, 2001).

The change process within Lufthansa also included short-term cost-cutting initiatives such as staff reduction, promotion of cost savings, privatisation, restructuring, the building of close strategic partnerships, outsourcing, and many others. Even Lufthansa's human resource management worked intensively to support the redevelopment process in the organisation and further promote a 'changed' and 'renewed' mindset. However, the only problematic aspect of this 'change initiative' of the company was the lack of assurance that it will bring about or lead to sustainable success (Bruch & Sattelberger, 2001). In the case study, 'Ubiquitous mobile technologies and the transformation of schooling' (Bjerede, Atkins, & Dede, 2010), how Qualcomm exemplified the advantageous use of technology and leveraging the Internet was discussed. The case of Qualcomm demonstrated the best practices in leading edge workplaces and reinforced the need to utilise technological tools that would create ubiquitous empowerment among the professionals as well as encourage unprecedented flexibility and improved work practices (Bjerede, Atkins, & Dede, 2010).

Interestingly, this organisational transformation strategy of Qualcomm not only encouraged significant changes in the organisation itself, but also outside of the organisation. Many of the 21st-century workplaces adopted the same strategy that Qualcomm employed. The trend was initiated by Qualcomm which further pushed other organisations and workplaces to shift from the use of manual labour and machines to the use of computers and telecommunication tools in order to expand their capabilities and accomplish human tasks. Because of this trend initiated by Qualcomm, there had been a consistent growth in proportion to the nation's labour force being engaged in the use of technology to make their jobs faster, more efficient, and more productive. In addition, many higher education institutions have pursued the active adoption of mobile devices and other ubiquitous tools in order to better facilitate learning (Bjerede, Atkins, & Dede, 2010).

III. ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP

Leadership is one of the most critical aspects of organisational transformation. There are many kinds of leadership that enable organisational transformation strategies to be implemented effectively. But certainly, the success of organisational transformation initiatives depends on the ability of the leader to first identify his role as an educator leader and respond to the actual needs of the organisation and how to exercise the positional authority broadly across the entire organisation (Salihu, 2019). Figure 1 illustrates a diagram (mind map) which identifies the various types of leadership that are deeply embedded in each of the major organisational transformation concepts explored in the third module of the study.

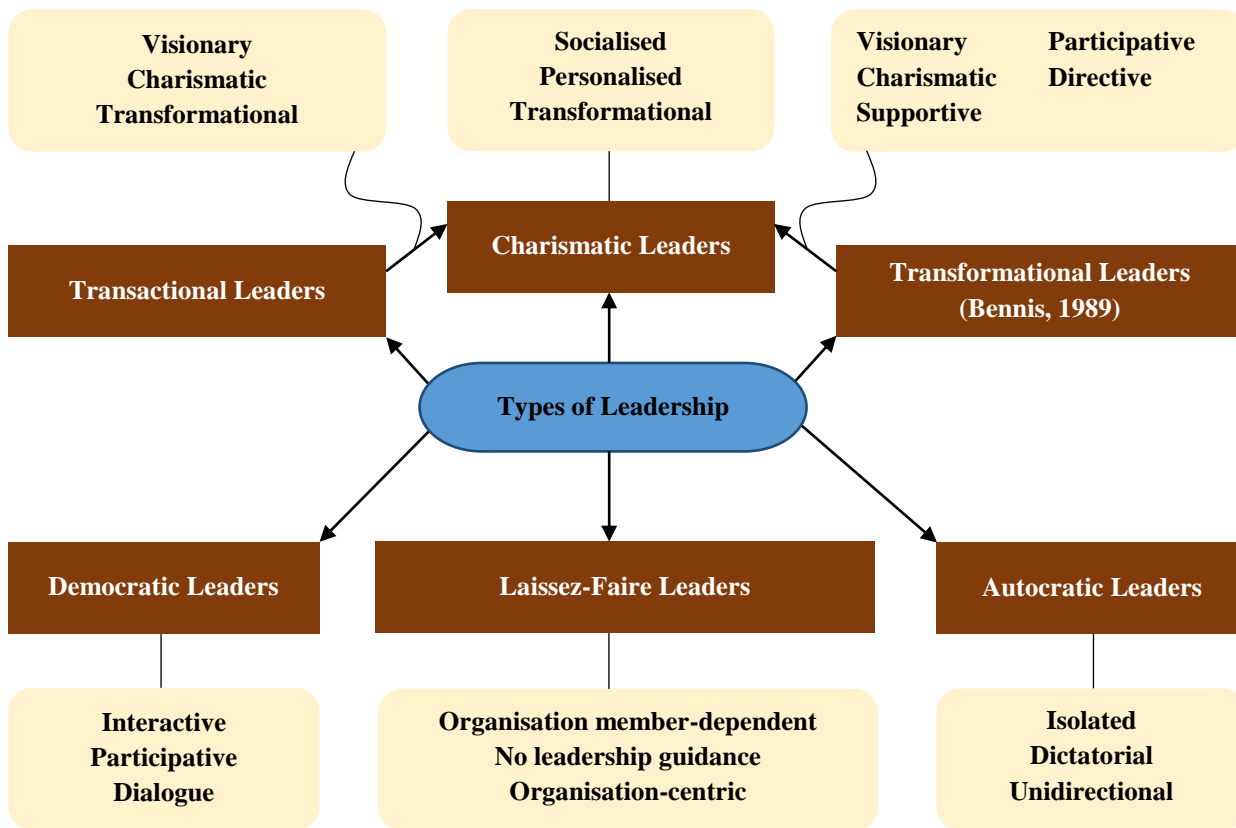


Figure 1. Types of Leadership Embedded in Major Organisational Transformation Concepts

As indicated by Figure 1, there are six types of leadership that play significant roles in transforming organisations and these are the following:

1. transformational leadership
2. transactional leadership
3. democratic leadership
4. autocratic leadership

5. charismatic leadership
6. laissez-faire leadership

There are various theories that attempted to rationalise and describe the emergence of these leadership paradigms. For instance, the path-goal theory which is a theory supported by situational contingencies identified both the transactional and transformational theories in terms of the performance, approach, goals, goal priorities, standards, stability, and

reward factors. The theory also differentiated the transactional and transformational theories in terms of these factors or characteristics citing that in terms of performance, transactional leaders act by means of 'exchange' while transformational leaders act through 'visions that inspire and transform'. In terms of approach, transactional leaders are more masculine while transformational leaders are more feminine and in terms of goal priority, transactional leaders are more focused on the firm while transformational leaders are focused on both the firm and the individual (Bennis, 1989).

Transformational Leaders

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), transformational leaders are characterised by the following ways of management:

1. Management of Attention- transformational leaders are fond of using dramatic ways to attract and enthuse people.
2. Management of Communication- transformational leaders employ clear methods of communication at all levels with special emphasis on one-to-one communication.
3. Management of Trust- transformational leaders lead through consistent action. They possess a certain degree of leadership predictability and approachability.
4. Management of Respect- transformational leaders lead by showing care and concern for people.
5. Management of Risk- transformational leaders also lead in terms of paying importance to advised decisions and taking prudent risks.

Overall, transformational leaders possess what may be considered as exceptional leadership as they challenge the status quo or the process, they inspire shared vision, they enable others to act, they model the way, and they encourage the heart and the emotional intelligence (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). For this reason, transformational leaders are the most effective leaders in terms of executing organisational transformation strategies as they include the people or organisational members in the entire change process (Ursino, 2001).

Transformational leaders are also the type of leaders that promote transformative, radical, and massive changes within the organisation and the individuals in the organisation. This therefore suggests that 'wholesale changes' in every aspect of the organisation will be touched on. Transformational leaders are the ones that are highly capable of adopting very different structure, systems, processes, functions, and tasks for the benefit of the organisation. They are also the type of leaders that introduce new ways of doing things as well as new paradigms. This means that fundamental changes in the culture and mindset of the people in an organisation will be attained successfully (Lim, 2011).

Transactional Leadership

Another effective leadership that may be used in implementing organisational transformation strategies is the transactional leadership. Because of this type of leadership's assertiveness and masculine approach, transactional leaders are highly capable of questioning the old systems, attitudes, beliefs, and ways of working in an organisation. As transactional leaders are highly-driven and focused on attaining the good of the organisation, this kind of leadership oftentimes serves as the most effective weapon for change agents in the organisation to successfully implement change without resistance (Burns & Nanus, 1985).

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leaders, on the other hand, are the type of leaders who possess tremendous influence in the organisation. According to Weber (1947), charismatic leaders take one of the three approaches to leadership which are a) the leader-centred approach, b) the follower-centred approach, and c) the interdependency model approach. A charismatic leader with a leader-centred approach is a person possessing exceptional charisma which is emphasised in a contextual crisis wherein the followers are under stress. This is when the attribution of charisma of such leaders are highlighted (Weber, 1947).

A charismatic leader with a follower-centred approach is seen when a contextual crisis arises and the followers become subjected to stress. This is the time when the charismatic leader (a person with exceptional vision) appears in the situation and applies his or her charisma to resolve the issues and the crisis. Finally, a charismatic leader with an interdependency approach is someone who has an exceptional vision as a person that applies his or her charisma during the time when the followers are under stress. What results is the mutuality of the charisma interaction (Weber, 1947). In the context of applying charismatic leadership to organisational transformation, charismatic leaders also play a significant role as they are the ones who calm the situation and make use of their charisma to gain the approval and support of the followers and even other members of the organisation who oppose the proposed changes in the system (Weber, 1947). Charismatic leaders are therefore effective agents of change as they are the ones who utilise their exceptional vision and charisma to win people for the good of the organisation.

Autocratic, Democratic, and Laissez-Faire Leadership

An autocratic leader is a powerful leader whose decisions in an organisation cannot be questioned. In terms of communication, autocratic leaders are unidirectional, which means that everything comes from the leader and is brought down to the followers for implementation. This means that autocratic leaders are also effective as agents of organisational transformation as resistance would not be present among the followers. The next type of leadership is democratic which is the opposite of autocratic and makes use of a 'reciprocal' or two-way communication. This type of leader may also

implement transformation, but it is to be expected that the process would have to go through long deliberations before coming into a specific agreement. Finally, the laissez-faire type of leadership is also effective in promoting organisational transformation because communication is centred between organisation members, with little contact with the leader. This means that it would be easier for the organisation members to decide among themselves on how they would go about the changes that are intended to be implemented by the organisation.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has critically analysed the concept of challenges and changes in the context of workplace with specific attention to higher education institutions. Similarly, the paper has explored the different approaches of organisational transformation and leadership, and has provided a descriptive case study on how such approaches could be applicable in the context of higher education institutions for a better and sustainable tomorrow.

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