Ethical Leadership as an Imperative in Zambian Universities: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Currently, Zambian universities face challenges of ethical leadership. These challenges are multifaceted and mostly common. In their wake, there is no guidance on how to devise a fitting ethical leadership. The objective of this article is to theoretically answer to this need. To this effect, it interrogates the classical notions of ethics and leadership. It then comparatively explores major models of ethics, that is, the deontological, teleological and relationality-responsibility models. In this light, it makes an evaluation of ethical challenges in university leadership. Though particular university-situations vary, the assumption of this treatment is that there are certain enduring ethical qualities and principles that should cut across. These features should be present in ethical leadership in any university context. Thus, through a comparative analysis of literature on the major ethical models and a discussion on the implications of prevalent ethical challenges in universities, the article establishes and recommends the model that can be used to adequately shape leadership to meet common ethical exigencies. On this score, it also concludes that effective leadership of universities cannot be delinked from ethics; the two are sides of the same coin and are both indispensable for the success and sustainability of universities.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Ethical Culture, Relationality-Responsibility Model, Success, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In common parlance, it is not unusual to encounter demands for ethical leadership in Zambian universities, let alone the manner in which this leadership is to be exercised. However, there is also a plurality in the understanding of what should constitute ethical leadership in these settings. Worse still, there is a lack of guidelines from ethicists as to how to formulate ethical principles to actualize such a form of leadership. Evidently, ethical guidance in universities has been limited to research undertakings and business affairs pertaining to matters of corporate governance.

The objective of this article is, therefore, to theoretically establish the nature of an appropriate interaction between ethics and leadership in Zambian universities. At the center of this endeavor are the two concepts of ethics and leadership as well as classical models of ethics that have been used to facilitate ethical decision-making and conduct. In my view, only when there is an agreement on the meanings of these concepts and a clarification of ethical models will it be plausible to consider the kind of ethical leadership that should be developed in Zambian universities, given the complex ethical demands that beset them and threaten their very survival. To this end, the article has relied on the review of pertinent literature.

The article begins by highlighting the notions of ethics and leadership. It then explores three major models of ethics, and evaluates them in the light of ethical leadership challenges that these universities are faced

with. Though particular university-situations in which such leadership is required vary, the fundamental assumption of this treatment is that there are certain enduring qualities and principles that cut across. Invariably, these should be manifest in ethical leadership in any university context. Thus, through an analytical comparison of major ethical models and a discussion on prevalent ethical challenges, the article establishes the kind of model that can be employed to adequately shape university leadership to meet those shared ethical exigencies.

UNDERSTANDING ETHICS

Generally, ethics refers to a fundamental concept that involves understanding and evaluating moral principles and values that guide human behavior. It provides a framework for making ethical decisions and involves applying these principles to specific situations and issues. As a branch of philosophy, it deals with moral principles and values that guide human behavior. It involves understanding and evaluating what is right and wrong, good and bad, and just and unjust, and making decisions that reflect these values (Ferrell et al., 2019). In other words, ethics refers to a set of principles and standards that govern human conduct, and involves making choices and taking actions that are consistent with these principles.

Ethics is thus crucial in all facets of human life, including personal, social, and professional contexts, and plays an important role in promoting responsible and accountable behavior in all these areas. In the workplace, ethics plays a vital role in ensuring that individuals and organizations behave in a responsible and accountable manner. Ethical behavior in the workplace involves treating others with respect and fairness, upholding the law and regulations, and promoting social responsibility and sustainability (Ferrell et al., 2019). It also involves making decisions that are consistent with moral principles and values, even if they may not be in the short-term interest of the organization.

Ethics can be broadly divided into two categories: normative ethics and applied ethics. Normative ethics is concerned with establishing and evaluating moral standards and principles, and provides a framework for making ethical decisions. It includes theories which provide different perspectives on what constitutes ethical behavior. Applied ethics, on the other hand, involves applying these principles to specific situations and issues, such as business ethics, bioethics, and environmental ethics. My focus, as alluded to earlier, is on the former and its connection with the concept of leadership.

THE NOTION OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership can be defined as the ability of an individual to guide, direct, and influence others towards achieving a common goal or vision (Northouse, 2018). It involves the use of various skills, such as communication, decision-making, and problem-solving, to motivate and inspire people to work towards a shared objective. On this front, leadership styles can vary depending on the situation and the needs of the organization or team. Some leaders adopt a more autocratic style, where they make decisions and provide direction without consulting their followers. Others take a more democratic approach, where they involve their team members in decision-making and seek input from others.

In addition to the styles of leadership, there are also different theories and models that have been developed to explain leadership. For example, the trait theory suggests that certain personality traits, such as intelligence, extraversion, and emotional stability, are associated with effective leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). The situational leadership theory proposes that leaders should adapt their style to fit the needs and abilities of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Other theories include the transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of inspiring and motivating followers, and the authentic leadership theory, which focuses on the leader's ability to stay

true to their values and beliefs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

It worthwhile to note that leadership can also be influenced by factors such as organizational culture, power dynamics, and diversity. For instance, leaders who operate in a hierarchical and bureaucratic culture may adopt a more autocratic style, while those in a more collaborative and innovative culture may adopt a more democratic style (Schein, 2010). Moreover, leaders who come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives can bring unique strengths to the leadership role, but also face challenges in building relationships and communicating effectively with others (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

In any case, effective leadership has been shown to have a positive impact on organizational performance and employee satisfaction (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). It can help to create a sense of direction and purpose, promote teamwork, and enhance productivity. Moreover, leaders who exhibit qualities such as integrity, empathy, and resilience can inspire trust and loyalty among their followers.

Overall, leadership is a complex and multifaceted concept. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. The different theories, styles, and factors that influence leadership can, however, help us identify skills that constitute ethical leadership.

MODELS OF ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP

There are several models of ethics that can be applied in leadership, each with its own unique approach to defining ethical behavior. However, there three broad ones that in which all them can be categorized, and these are deontology, teleology and relationality-responsibility models.

Deontological Model

The deontological model is a moral theory which is based on the belief that actions should be judged based on whether they follow certain ethical rules or duties. Ethics or morality is primarily about duty, law, or obligation. In this model, leaders are expected to adhere to a set of moral rules and principles, regardless of the consequences of their actions. For example, a leader who values honesty would not lie, even if doing so would result in short-term benefits for the organization. Deontology is thus concerned with the inherent rightness or wrongness of actions, regardless of their consequences. According to this model, actions are evaluated based on the moral principles that underlie them, rather than on the outcomes they produce (Bowie, 2017). In other words, deontologists believe that certain actions are intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of the consequences that follow from them.

The deontological models' strength lies in that "it upholds objectivity, disagrees with subjectivism and relativism and prevents the individual from making personal exceptions, thus combating the dangers of individualism so prevalent in our society (Curran, 61)." It provides a clear set of moral principles that can guide decision-making and behavior. When leaders consistently act in accordance with these ethical principles, even in difficult or challenging situations, they can demonstrate their commitment to moral values and their willingness to make difficult choices in the service of those values (Reynolds, 2019). This can help to build a sense of trust and respect among followers, who may be more likely to view the leader as a role model and to follow their example.

However, it also has inherent weaknesses, and these include the following:

- Law never covers all the actions that we perform in our daily lives as we do not always base our choices and acts on its guidance.
- By making obedience as the primary virtue, the legal model does not sufficiently take into account the presence of the self as the moral subject and agent.

- It largely fails to account for the role of the virtues in moral living and since it simply indicates the limits for conduct, it is inadequate in guiding our actions in a positive way.

This model does not recognize the existential fact that conflicts are bound to rise among different. It can be difficult to determine which ethical principles should take priority in complex or ambiguous situations. For example, a deontological leader who believes that it is always important to tell the truth may struggle to reconcile this principle with the need to maintain confidentiality or protect sensitive information (Suchy & Newman, 2019).

Many laws also contain exceptions, and this that makes strict application of this model impossible at times.

Some critics also argue that the deontological model of ethics can be overly rigid and inflexible, and that it may not always take into account the complex and dynamic nature of real-world decision-making. For example, a deontological leader who always prioritizes honesty above all else may struggle in situations where there are competing ethical considerations or where there is a need to balance multiple values at once (Suchy & Newman, 2019).

Thus, though the deontological model is an important perspective on ethical leadership that can help guide decision-making and behavior, it may not be appropriate in all situations. It can nonetheless provide a valuable framework for leaders who are seeking to act in accordance with their moral principles and build a culture of ethics and integrity within their organizations.

Teleological Model

The teleological model of ethics, also known as consequentialist ethics, is an approach to ethical decision-making that focuses on the outcomes or consequences of actions. The goodness of an action is assessed on the basis of its consequence: it is good if its consequences are good, and vice versa (Gula, 1989). "In everyday life we often follow a teleological model. We determine what our end or goal is before we choose the means to achieve that goal or end. Such a model incorporates a commonsensical approach to making human decisions (Curran, 1999, p.66)." Leaders who follow this model prioritize the achievement of goals and outcomes that are beneficial to their organization and stakeholders. In the workplace, this approach can be applied to decision-making processes such as resource allocation, project prioritization, and performance management.

One way in which the teleological model of ethics can be applied in leadership is through the use of performance metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs). By setting clear goals and measuring progress towards those goals, leaders can align their decisions and actions with the desired outcomes for their organization. For example, a leader might prioritize increasing revenue or market share, and make decisions that are focused on achieving those outcomes, such as investing in product development or expanding into new markets.

However, the teleological model of ethics has also been criticized for its narrow focus on outcomes, and its potential to prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability and ethical considerations. Leaders who follow this approach may be more likely to take risks or engage in unethical behavior if they believe it will lead to the desired outcome. As a result, it is important for leaders to consider other ethical models and principles, and to balance the teleological approach with considerations such as social responsibility, stakeholder interests, and long-term sustainability.

In addition to the use of performance metrics and KPIs, leaders who follow the teleological model of ethics may also use cost-benefit analysis to evaluate decisions and actions. Cost-benefit analysis involves weighing the potential costs and benefits of a particular action or decision, and choosing the option that maximizes the

overall benefits while minimizing the costs. The risk in this approach, however, may be to disregard the manner in which the action is performed and consequently using the end to justify the means (Gula, 1989).

One potential benefit of the teleological model of ethics in leadership is that it provides a clear framework for decision-making, and can help leaders to focus on outcomes that are aligned with their organization's mission and values. However, it is important for leaders to consider the potential unintended consequences of their actions, and to balance short-term outcomes with long-term sustainability and ethical considerations.

Leaders who follow the teleological model of ethics may also need to consider the perspectives and interests of different stakeholders, and to allow for stakeholder engagement and dialogue to ensure that their decisions are aligned with the needs and expectations of those stakeholders. This can help to build trust and legitimacy, and to promote a culture of ethical behavior within the organization.

Like the deontological model, it is therefore clear that the teleological model of ethics can be a useful tool for leaders in the workplace. However, it should be balanced with other ethical models and principles, and applied with caution to ensure that the outcomes are aligned with long-term sustainability and ethical considerations.

Relationality-Responsibility Model

As for the relationality-responsibility model of ethics, it constitutes an approach to ethical decision-making that emphasizes the importance of relationships and interconnectedness, and the responsibilities that arise from those relationships. It also incorporates different temporal realities- past, present, and future. On this score, it emphasizes historicity, change, individuality, and contingency. Besides, it is open to let go of some general universal morality common to all humankind.   This is because it takes into account the great diversity and particularity existent in the world today. It holds that there is no law that can be commonly adhered to, and that there is an apparent absence of inbuilt goals or ends that should be pursued by all. In this regard, it also considers moral persons as the ones that act and are acted upon and must respond, in solidarity with a community of moral persons, according to their interpretation of what is happening to them at particular moments (Curran, 1999).

With this background, it follows that the relationality-responsibility model recognizes that individuals and organizations are part of larger social and environmental systems, and that their actions can have far-reaching impacts on others. According to this approach, ethical decision-making requires considering the impact that our actions will have on others and taking responsibility for the outcomes of those actions on the environment and broader society (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). As such, leaders who follow this approach prioritize the development of positive relationships with stakeholders, and consider the ethical implications of their actions on those stakeholders. This can help to promote more inclusive and equitable decision-making, and to build stronger relationships with stakeholders.

In the workplace, the relationality-responsibility model of ethics can be applied in a number of ways. One way is through the development of stakeholder relationships that are based on trust, respect, and open communication. Leaders who prioritize relationality-responsibility may engage in stakeholder engagement and dialogue to understand the perspectives and needs of different stakeholders, and to ensure that their decisions and actions are aligned with the broader interests of the organization and its stakeholders. It emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with employees and taking responsibility for the impact that leadership decisions have on those employees. This can include recognizing the unique needs and perspectives of individual employees, being transparent and communicative about leadership decisions, and creating a culture of trust and respect within the workplace (Held, 2006).

Another way in which the relationality-responsibility model of ethics can be applied in leadership is through the development of a culture of ethical behavior within the organization. This may involve the implementation of ethical codes and standards, the provision of ethics training and education, and the promotion of ethical decision-making through rewards and incentives.

Consequently, by recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals and organizations, and the responsibilities that arise from those relationships, leaders can make decisions and take actions that promote long-term sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical behavior in the workplace.

FINDINGS ON THE PREVAILING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN ZAMBIAN UNIVERSITIES

Universities face unique challenges in maintaining ethical leadership due to their complex organizational structures, diverse stakeholder groups, and the high stakes associated with their educational and research missions. Some of the challenges of ethical leadership in universities are balancing competing interests, ensuring academic freedom, upholding ethical standards, addressing conflicts of interest, fostering a culture of ethical behavior and promoting social responsibility. Such challenges are a common phenomenon in Zambian universities. Generally, these challenges can be attributed to a lack of proper ethical guidelines and principles, which often result in unethical practices among university leaders.

One of the main ethical challenges in Zambian universities is corruption. According to a study by Tembo and Lwanga (2021), corruption is a major challenge in Zambian universities, and it often involves university leaders. This is because university leaders are often in charge of allocating resources and making decisions that affect the entire university community. As a result, they have the power to use their position for personal gain or to favor certain individuals or groups. This situation is compounded by the lack of adequate resources, which can result in poor working conditions for staff and inadequate facilities for students. This can lead to unethical practices such as the mismanagement of resources and the use of public funds for personal gain. Chipimo and Banda (2018) contend that inadequate funding is a major challenge facing Zambian universities, and it often results in a lack of transparency and accountability in resource allocation.

In addition to the aforementioned ethical challenges, another challenge facing Zambian universities is the lack of transparency in decision-making processes. Ngoma (2020) observes that university leaders often make decisions without consulting the relevant stakeholders, such as faculty and students. Currently, universities are increasingly engaged in commercial activities, such as research partnerships, technology transfer and outsourcing of services such internet connectivity. Lack of transparency in such dealings can lead to mistrust and resentment among the university community, as well as the perception that decisions are being made for personal gain rather than the good of the institution. This requires that leaders balance these commercial interests with academic values, such as openness and public benefit (Makela et al., 2018).

Another ethical challenge is academic dishonesty. This includes practices such as plagiarism, cheating, and falsification of academic records. According to a study by Chirwa and Simumba (2018), academic dishonesty is a widespread problem in Zambian universities, and it often involves both students and university leaders. Academic plagiarism is a widespread problem in Zambian universities, and it often goes unpunished due to a lack of policies and enforcement mechanisms (Mwamba 2020). Similarly, academic qualification fraud is a significant problem in the country, and it often involves the fabrication of academic credentials or the submission of fake certificates (Zambia Qualifications Authority Report, 2019). All these factors undermine the integrity of the academic system and lead to a lack of trust in the qualifications of graduates.

A third ethical challenge is discrimination and harassment. This includes discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors, as well as sexual harassment. According to a study by Chanda and Mwaba (2020), discrimination and harassment are common in Zambian universities, and they often go unreported due to fear of retaliation or lack of trust in the university leadership. Sexual harassment is quite pervasive, and it is often perpetrated by those in positions of power, such as lecturers and administrators (Muleya and Simwami, 2020). This can create an unsafe and hostile environment for students, particularly female students, and can undermine the credibility and integrity of the academic system. Furthermore, there is nepotism in Zambian universities. Nepotism involves the favoring of relatives or friends in decision-making processes, such as in the hiring of staff or awarding of scholarships. A study by Chinyama (2021) found that nepotism is a widespread problem in Zambian universities, and it often undermines meritocracy and leads to the hiring of underqualified individuals. This can also lead to a lack of diversity and a perception of unfairness among the university community.

Another ethical challenge in Zambian universities is the issue of academic freedom. According to a study by Ngulube (2019), academic freedom is frequently violated in Zambian universities, particularly in cases where faculty members are critical of university leadership or government policies. This can lead to self-censorship among faculty members and a lack of critical discourse in the academic environment.

DISCUSSION ON ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP IN UNIVERSITIES

Form the foregoing, it is clear that the ethical challenges facing Zambian universities are significant and complex. They require a multifaceted approach to address, and failure on this front can undermine the integrity of the academic system. By promoting a culture of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct, universities can address these challenges and promote the integrity and excellence in the academic system. The deontological, teleological and relationality-responsibility model are relevant to addressing this situation. This is fundamentally because aspects of all the three models are integral to moral experience, and, as such, elements of each should always be taken into consideration.

However, given the weaknesses that I have highlighted in the deontological and teleological models, it becomes evident that the complexity of ethical leadership challenges requires an equally comprehensive approach, and the relationality-responsibility model fits the bill. On this score, the relationality-responsibility manifest greater emphasis on historicity, change, individuality, and contingency as well as openness to defy traditional shared norms. It incorporates the strengths of the teleological and deontological models. Besides, neither the deontological nor the teleological model can account, in the same comprehensive manner, for the diversity, historicity, and contingency which characterize the sources of ethical leadership challenges plaguing Zambian universities today.

Universities have a unique role in promoting social responsibility and addressing social and environmental challenges. On this account, ethical leaders must engage with broader societal issues, such as sustainability and social justice, and work to align the mission and values of the institution with the greater good (McNett et al., 2018). The relationality-responsibility approach to ethics emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and the responsibilities that arise from those relationships. This approach suggests that ethical behavior is not solely based on individual decision-making, but rather is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which people operate. In the case of universities, this means understanding the unique challenges and opportunities that arise from the diversity of individuals and perspectives within the institution. By acknowledging and valuing this diversity, ethical leaders can create an inclusive and respectful academic environment that promotes the wellbeing of all members of the community. Besides, ethical leaders must consider the impact of their decisions on others and take responsibility for their actions within those

relationships (Liu & Brown, 2019). In the university context, they must engage in a collaborative and transparent decision-making process that considers the perspectives and needs of all stakeholders.

Openness to new insights and changing times which is inherent in the relationality-responsibility model creates an opportunity for Zambian universities to prioritize academic freedom and ensure that faculty members are free to express their opinions and engage in critical discourse. On this front, relationality-responsibility model hinges on the assumption that moral ideas or beliefs "are approximations to the truth and therefore need to be revised in light of better evidence and improved reflection" (Gula, 1989, p. 20). As such, university leaders have a responsibility to protect academic freedom and promote open inquiry and debate. In the actual sense, ethical leadership in universities should, therefore, also involve a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement (Hodges, 2018). This includes engaging in professional development, staying up-to-date with best practices in ethical leadership, and seeking feedback on personal strengths and areas for growth. By modeling a growth mindset, ethical leaders can encourage others in the community to prioritize learning and continuous improvement as well. However, this freedom can sometimes come into conflict with other values, such as respect for diversity or social responsibility (Jaworski, 2021).

The relationality-responsibility approach has particular relevance for leadership in universities, where leaders are responsible for shaping the academic environment and promoting ethical behavior among faculty, staff, and students. Universities are complex social systems, and ethical decision-making requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of the various stakeholders and the potential impact of decisions on those individuals (Hodges, 2018). For example, a university leader must consider the impact of decisions on faculty and support staff, as well as on students and the wider community. This may involve making difficult decisions about resource allocation or organizational restructuring, but a relationality-responsibility approach requires leaders to engage in a collaborative and transparent decision-making process that considers the perspectives and needs of all stakeholders.

Students' well-being is an important aspect of ethical leadership in higher education. Ethical leaders must prioritize student health and safety, provide resources for mental health and wellness, and address issues such as sexual harassment and discrimination that can impact student well-being (Eisenberg et al., 2019). At the same time, however, ethical leaders must work to create a culture that promotes ethical behavior and values at all levels, providing ethical training and support, and holding individuals accountable for unethical behavior (Karakas, 2021). This might entail creating policies and procedures that promote ethical behavior and hold individuals accountable for unethical actions in the entire university community (Ashworth & Saxton, 2013).

The relationality-responsibility approach to leadership requires a commitment to creating an ethical culture within the university. This involves not only setting a positive example through personal behavior but also creating policies and procedures that promote ethical behavior and hold individuals accountable for unethical actions. For example, a university might implement a code of conduct or establish an ethics committee to promote ethical decision-making and respond to ethical violations.

Universities are expected to uphold high ethical standards, including promoting integrity, honesty, and transparency. However, this can be challenging in the face of competing demands and pressures, such as financial constraints or external regulations (Hsieh & Kao, 2018). As such, university leaders must be vigilant in addressing conflicts of interest, such as situations where financial gain or personal interests may influence decision-making. These contingences, which are accommodated by the relationality-responsibility model, requires transparency, accountability, and effective oversight mechanisms (Gelinas, 2018).

In the wake of emerging circumstances, the relationality-responsibility approach can give impetus to universities not only to be receptive to new views but also to advocate for increased funding from the government and other sources, and ensure that resources are managed transparently and ethically in these

times when traditional funding from government is neither timely nor adequate. Notwithstanding, universities have a responsibility to promote social responsibility and contribute to the public good. This can be challenging in the face of limited resources and competing demands, but it is a critical aspect of ethical leadership (Alfred, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Given the complexities of Zambian universities, it is inevitable to conclude that for these institutions to flourish, they need effective leadership. This kind of leadership is naturally one that is inextricably bound up with ethical leadership. Universities cannot be led effectively without embracing ethical leadership. This is imperative due to the numerous ethical challenges that face leadership of these higher institutions of learning. Consequently, the required ethical leadership for these universities is equally complex and multifaceted in that it calls for a commitment to upholding ethical standards, balancing competing interests, and promoting a culture of ethical behavior. In this respect, leaders have to be proactive in addressing ethical issues as well as work collaboratively with stakeholders. At the same time, ethical leaders must be aware of a range of regulations and legal requirement frameworks to which universities are subjected to and work within them to uphold ethical standards, integrity of their institutions and protect the interests of their institutions. On this score, the relationality-responsibility approach to ethics provides a multifaceted platform for such ethical leadership because it encompasses all relationships and temporal realities that define the moral environment in which universities in Zambia found themselves. It paves way to a creative and ongoing responsiveness to past, present and future circumstances of university settings. All in all, ethical leadership, which is informed by the relationality-responsibility model of ethics, would thus play a crucial role in developing an appropriate leadership as well as promoting responsible and accountable behavior, building trust and credibility, and achieving long-term success and sustainability of universities.

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