The Imperative of Transformative Academic Leadership at Higher Learning Institutions in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Several institutions of higher learning in Kenya, i.e., institutes, colleges and universities are facing/have faced challenges regarding leadership and management. Some of these institutions have had crises at one moment or another due to leadership which lacks vision, administrative and managerial skills. The author of this article has worked in collaboration with a few universities in Kenya and has also seen the distress highlighted by the media. Some of these institutions simply lack effective leadership and management personnel. Among the common problems found in these institutions include very rapid staff turnover, discontentment by various staff members, incompetence and mediocracy in the top management within these institutions, lack of vision for the institutions, ignorance about management, etc. This article emerges from different trainings and workshops attended by the author, as well as readings from different authors and leadership experts. The author therefore proposes the transformative leadership model to the institutions which is more involving and vision inspiring so that they may achieve institutional goals and managerial excellence.

Key Words: Transformative leadership, vision, motivation, inspiration, leadership, influence, collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Naylor, (1999) defines leadership as a process of prompting the institution's personnel to achieve organizational goals and managerial excellence. Burns, (1978) postulates that transformational leadership is a form of governance that transforms members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, to an advanced level of motivation at which the administrator inspires his subjects to be motivated to rise above and beyond current standards of realization and performance and move to even higher levels of achievement and performance. With **transformational leadership,** the personnel are innately driven to follow the leader's example because of the high opinion for their leader. The leader constructs an inspirational vision of the future that people feel obliged to adhere to. He/she as well functions as a role model for his/her subjects.

However, in an academic setting leadership is the capability of having a vision for an academic institution. In that respect, an academic leader must have a clear vision of the institutions including the futuristic element of engagements, bearing in mind the accomplishment of the preferred final state that he/she would share with all the members at the institutional level. But that would also further replicate and create new programs of teaching and learning as well as governance, main concerns, policies and procedures which everyday life of the institution consists of. Therefore, a main component of leadership in education is the capacity and ability to envisage the future. The core of leadership in the academia is geared to the leader's exemplary and verbal inspiration of the system, through active and effective impact on conduct, opinions and feelings of the workers within the schooling system. This consequently would offer a tactical vision of

creating coherence through the whole system. Because of this, the author of this article proposes the transformative academic leadership for Higher Institutions of Learning in Kenya.

THE LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS FACING SOME INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN KENYA

Taking a look at some of the universities and other institutions of higher learning, a critical mind would certainly pinpoint some of the leadership issues that affect these institutions. The problem first emanates from how these leaders are appointed. Vested interests by stakeholders highly take the center stage, be it in the public or private institutions. The stakeholders may be influenced by several factors including sectarianism, nationalism, tribalism, religious affiliation, political motives, gender etc.

The above factors and many more would not consider first the basic requirements of leadership and professionalism demanded for and by these institutions. The factors have contributed to the unprofessionalism, mediocracy, incompetence, etc., which in turn has led to the mismanagement and running down of some of these institutions. Some of the leaders are so unqualified that they therefore become intimidated by their qualified staff. This makes the leader to adopt arrogance and intimidation as a way of salvaging his/her image. Such leaders may also end up appointing more incompetent personnel in the system. This is due to the fact that the leader would want have around him/her those he/she can manipulate. Such a leader fears and hates critical minds and these, in turn, may find it more appropriate to quit the system rather than to stay. Such a type of leader is always surrounded by sycophancy accompanied with its lack of truth and sincerity. Such leadership style creates a body of spies and cocoons outside of which the leader feels vulnerable and unsafe. Unfortunately, the members of these groups are, as well, so incompetent and due to that the mediocracy mars the entire system of the institutional leadership. In such an environment academic professionalism is not the goal of the institution but individual selfish interests are propagated. This is not a foreign phenomenon in some of the Kenyan institutions of higher learning.

One needs to notice that the goal of an academic institution is to provide education, promote research and innovation, and prepare students for professional life while contributing to the welfare of society. The primary goal of a higher education institution should be to provide students with quality education and enriching experiences that allow them to develop into well rounded active citizens. This can only be attained by having quality and professional academic staff and not mere sycophants. A genuine academic leader should therefore adopt a kind of leadership which looks into acquisition, empowerment, retention and promotion of the competent and critical academic staff who will promote the goal of the institution.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

There are various forms of leadership. This article proposes a move from transactional form of leadership to transformative leadership style. The goal of any type of leadership is to get employees to perform beyond the expected. While transactional leadership does this by meting out rewards and punishments, transformative leadership does this by influencing the values and attitudes of others. It takes a special type of person to deliver an inspiring vision of the future. Transformational leadership, according to Needle, (2021) is a management philosophy that encourages and inspires employees to innovate and develop new ways to grow and improve the path to a company's future success. Using this method, executives give trusted employees the independence to make decisions and support new problem-solving approaches.

According to Dara Fontein, (2022) transformational leadership is a style whereby leaders influence, inspire, and encourage employees to deliver positive change. A transformational leader will work with teams beyond their immediate self-interests to **identify needed change and create a vision to guide that change.** They typically set an example at the executive level and strive for a strong sense of organizational culture,

employee ownership, and autonomy in the workplace—motivating individuals without micromanaging.

Transformational leadership occurs when leaders perform their roles so effectively that they gain the trust, respect, appreciation and loyalty of the people who follow them. This, in turn, changes (transforms) people's behaviors. On the other hand, with the **transactional style of leadership**, the leader motivates people to work harder by offering rewards (promotions, bonuses, paid vacation) for good behavior, and punishments (demotions, improvement programs) for poor behavior. The motivation to work hard comes from outside the employee. It is not intrinsic as in transformative leadership. Institutions of higher learning in Kenya should adopt this form of transformative school leadership which plays an important role in promoting educational innovation and restructuring by creating a vision for the future, building a culture of collaboration, and empowering others to become leaders themselves.

DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

Sergiovanni, (1992) acknowledges five leadership strengths demonstrated by transformational educationists. He categorizes those dimensions as technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural.

The technical realm of transformational leadership in learning institution is good administrative and managerial practices, including planning and organization. As has been experienced in some of the learning institutions, lack of active, operative, evidence-based institutional governance, modification in education turn out to be much more difficult.

The human dimension is the involvement of the communal and interactive resources already accessible in the school environment. By enabling "interpersonal competence," Kenyan learning institutions can increase determination amongst the staff. The administrators should recognize that being involved in decision-making is a fundamental aspect in the human characteristic of transformational governance in learning institutions. The educational strength is based on the professional competency as well as implementation of effective learning methodologies that transformational educationists bring to their learning institutions. Such educationists instill and nurture change in the learning process through evaluation of issues existing in the learning policy. The Kenyan institutions should realize that educational strength here is connected to counseling, assessment, as well as professional advancement contained by the school setup.

The symbolic dimension is an imperative facet found in the transformational leadership model. The rituals and customs of the academic year are not to be taken for granted. Transformational leadership model identifies and acknowledges the important mission of administrators, lecturers and other education stakeholders as symbolic leaders of their learning institutions. Through the creation of a sense of understanding and togetherness, the symbolic force assists every member of the school community feel and acknowledge that they truly belong to the supportive group which strives to fulfill the objective of constructing the most favorable educational environment. This could appear peripheral, however, the transformational leadership approach puts symbolism as an essential aspect for any educational environment which aids learning and fosters self-actualization, hence enabling personal growth.

The cultural dimension of transformational leadership is a declaration of collective principles as well as truths. A cultural leader pronounces the institution's mission, as well as the mythos of the learning environment. Here, institutional history and memory are very significant. Institution's culture is embedded in her history. This is not a static history but a progressive one. Sergiovanni upholds culture since it is the adhesive that binds all learners together. The school culture prompts both learners and educators of the imperative duty they are bound to perform as a team. Although Sergiovanni equates "cultural leadership" with the role of "high priest," it is imperative to mark the differentiation between charismatic leader and demagogue. Qualities of a transformational leader, particularly the symbolic and cultural dimensions, call

upon educators to lead by doing. Transformative leaders have high expectations for themselves and others. But instead of laying down the law, such leaders "walk the walk" and model the standards of behavior they expect from the team.

ADVANTAGES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Why is the transformative leadership style becoming popular – and to some extent, necessary for higher institutions of learning in Kenya? One of the main benefits of the transformational leadership style is that it treats people as individuals. Transformational leaders, according to Bakker et al., (2022) regard their followers as equals, each with his own skills and experience, and seek to bring out the best in them through coaching and encouragement instead of barking orders. Employees feel supported, so they work hard and stay. Other benefits of such transformative leadership include the following:

a) It Unites Everyone in a Common Cause

Transformational leaders, according to Thompson, (2019) stand out in their ability to quickly analyze the institution's current situation and create a righteous vision for its improvement and growth. Through passion and influence, the leader communicates his/her vision to the staff (both teaching and non-teaching) to get everyone on board. The employees are motivated to do what is asked of them because the whole work experience is perceived as a purposeful and enjoyable adventure. In terms of bottom-line results, the organization should see productivity gains when a transformational leader comes on board. It is much easier to optimize performance when everyone is pulling in the same direction, as all people can see the big picture and feel united in a common cause.

b) It Reduces Turnover Costs

Employees come and go – and when someone goes, it can cost the organization dearly in terms of finding and training a replacement. A transformational leadership seeks to lower staff turnover by making people feel more engaged and included within the school environment (Heenan et al, 2023). United behind transformative leader's vision, Thompson, (2019) adds that, employees are more likely to feel like they are fitted in, like they are sharing the same goals with co-workers, and that they are not lonely. People who match the culture and behaviors of the institution would always tend to stick around, which decreases turnover.

Again, while cynicism and intents to resign are extensively considered indicators of employee negativity, initial research in organizational behaviors has considered them to be generalized traits. Cynicism has been considered to be a specific construct; it is a reflection of the staffs' perception of their leader (Lynn & Bateman, 1997). Cynicism is a product of ineffective leadership and lack of participation and consultation in decision making. Intention to quit (ITQ) is another form of employee's negative reaction to poor leadership. Factors that have been linked to ITQ include lack of job satisfaction, poor pay, unconducive working environment and lack of goal commitment. Employees are unlikely to have ITQ toward an institution where their need for efficacy is met in their respective job responsibilities. Highly resilient staff members are more likely to adapt after setbacks at work, rather than leave the organization.

c) It Treats People as Individuals

According to Cherry, (2023) transformational leadership believes in the power of perspective. It treats each staff member as an individual, with his/her own unique needs and capabilities. This kind of approach keeps the team environment informal and friendly because it treats followers as being equal to the leader. Directions are followed through support, advice, and encouragement, along with role-modeling, instead of

issuing orders. A transformational leader will even assign specific tasks based on his/her knowledge of each person's unique motivations, abilities, and strengths.

d) It Builds on the Resources of Every Member of the Institution

The correctly transformative leader is a motivator who seeks to motivate members of the team to be their better selves (https://www.umassglobal.edu/academic-programs/education/edd-organizational-leadership). Transformational educationists sacrifice both self-regard and self-promotion. In the contrary, they focus their attention and strength toward the common good of the entire group.

e) It Permits the Staff Members to be More Attached to their Work Institution

Closely related to the above point, transformational leaders encourage their subjects by increasing self-efficacy among staff members, by facilitating social identification within a group, and by linking organizational values to staff values. This allows staff members to feel further determined in their work and supplements their observed empowerment.

f) It Keeps the Institution Open and Ethical

Integrity is a core value of transformational leaders: Their entire sphere of influence is based upon them being transparent and openly living the values they have established for the organization. For this reason, a transformational leader is going to be laser-focused on doing the right thing. They tend to be value-driven and ethics-focused, which encourages the institution's employees to stick to the straight endeavours and act in the best interest of the institution and its wider communities. They are ethically-driven, keeping a tight focus on values, and it comes from an authentic perspective. It is almost impossible for transformational leader to "fake it in order to make it".

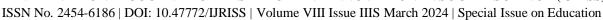### g) It Promotes Morale Through Better Communication

One of the biggest issues higher institutions of learning face is low morale, which usually occurs when the work environment grows stale, people are unclear of their job role or duties, or there is a lot of intra-group conflict. More often than not, the root cause of these problems is poor communication. Transformational leaders are, by definition, excellent communicators. The transformative leader provides clear and consistent messages to rally people behind his/her vision of the future. When an institution has a communication problem, it often brings in a transformational leader to articulate the corporate message clearly, reminding people of why they are doing what they are doing and breaking them out of the old routine.

h) It Seeks to Avoid Intimidation

Transformational leadership does not want to use their position to control others. They do not use fear or influence to coerce compliance. This leadership style prefers to use inspiration as the motivator for change instead. The leader uses humanistic concerns to change internal cultures because he/she brings the concept of hope back into the big picture. That is why the followers of such a transformational leader are often loyal to a fault with their devotion. They adopt the morality and ethics of the transformational leader in their own lives.

i) It Creates and Manages Change

For any institution to evolve, they must be willing to embrace change. However, change is notoriously tricky to implement because many people are resistant to it. Usually, it is because they are scared of the unknown or feel suspicious that the new situation will be worse than the old way of doing things. What is special about transformational leaders is their ability to clearly articulate the benefits and the morality of the

change by creating an inspiring new vision and getting people to buy into it (Thompson, 2019). This style of leadership focuses on the positive impact of the change "for the greater good" and tells people how they can contribute to it. This makes it much easier for employees to embrace the change and even enjoy it.

j) It Makes Work More Meaningful

Always there is an indication of an affirmative relationship between transformational leadership and job-related outcomes. Keenly observed one would find out that transformational leaders make work significant by giving room to autonomy (Khan, H., Rehmat, M., Butt, T.H. *et al,* 2020). The subjects of transformational leaders quite often have strong sentiment that their determination is well-regarded, honoured, esteemed and self-congruent.

k) Makes the Staff Feel More Empowered

Transformational leadership encourages a sentiment of empowerment among all workers. There exists an opposite relationship between cynicism (a feeling to think that individuals are driven solely by selfishness and skepticism) and transformational leadership, since the people under a highly transformational leader are usually academically motivated and frequently confronted to be open-minded (Lynn & Bateman, 1997). Several researches in transformative leadership have shown the connections amongst staff empowerment and job fulfillment/satisfaction, reduced anger and frustration, and a sense of organizational affection.

QUALITIES OF A TRANSFORMATIVE ACADEMIC LEADER

Leadership in the academia has always called for courage, a deep level of commitment, and extremely hard work. But in today's complex and fast-moving society, it also requires a high degree of self-understanding. The following are some of the qualities a transformative academic leader should possess.

1. **Disruptive Thinking.** A transformative leader does not accept the status quo. According to Steele, (2018) a transformative leader needs to demonstrate the courage to bust out of the cage and openly acknowledge and condemn current structures that do not best serve institution. He/she must share his vision for new horizons and inspired others to do the same.
2. **Call to Action.** transformative leadership called for action—an action to redress wrongs and to ensure that every student/staff who enters an institution has an equal opportunity to participate fully, to be treated with respect, and to develop his or her capabilities. Bennis and Nanus, (2007) purport that a new transformative leader is needed, and this type of leader is one who commits people to action, who converts his staff members and students into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change. The transformative leader must see many of his staff getting to action for the good of the learners as well as for the general good of the institution.
3. **Demand for Social Justice.** Transformative leaders understand that the injustices perpetuated in learning institutions are a result of the inequities perpetuated in society. These inequities adversely affect students' learning and success (Shields & Warke, 2010). As a change-agent leader, the transformative does not accept the status quo of bright, needy students, and assisted them to acquire scholarships through various local and international organizations. As socially just leader, the transformative leader conscientiously and proactively challenges the social and administrative factors in the institution that tend to perpetuate the imbalances. Transformative leadership requires a focus on social justice, and educators throughout the system must be committed to ensuring that every student succeeds. Burns, (1978) argues that leaders should not ignore the influence of enacting values, such as justice and respect to create positive change. Foster (1986) also makes connections between transformative leadership and education by emphasizing the need for leaders to change existing norms.
4. **Serve Ethically**. According to Maritz (2010), Perucci (2009), and Ujifusa (2014) many employees—and stakeholders in general—do not trust leaders, and they lack faith in the ethics of

leaders. In general, only a small percentage of employees trust that their leaders or coworkers have their best interests in mind, and very minimal number, if any, of the employees believe and trust their leaders to make the right decisions for themselves and the institutions they lead. Many leaders appear incapable of earning the trust of their employees or gaining the support of society in general (Perucci, 2009).

Integrity is a core value of transformational leaders. Their entire sphere of influence is based upon them being transparent and openly living the values they have established for the institution. According to Quinn, (2005) transformative leaders are committed to creating results that benefit others rather than maintaining their own power and comfort. A transformative leader encourages the staff members to support change. According to Northouse, (2010) ethical leaders are able to do this because they raise the self-awareness of those, they serve so they too can move beyond their own self-interests to create change that benefits others. In his article, *Going Ethical in Management: A Call to Catholic Universities*, Mvumbi, (2011) outlines the importance of ethics in university management.

1. **Finding Common Ground.** A transformative leader acknowledges that different people can and would disagree on ideas and their execution. The leader therefore, must facilitate open, critical dialogue to reaffirm common goals, inspired open minds, and rallied around shared ideas and ideals for change.
2. **Active Listening.** A transformative leader is open to listening. A leader should acknowledge that others share similar interests and are critical thought partners. He should seek continuous feedback and improvement for himself, his team, his students, his staff, and even for the institution as a whole. He needs to avoid emotional excess while working to reduce bureaucracy. He should seek a balanced personality and create a school climate and culture that pays careful attention to the unique needs of every person with whoever he interacts.
3. **Cognitive Diversity.** As a transformative leader embraces big, bold ideas to better serve the institution. He should always acknowledge that as opposed to one solution, transforming systems required multiple ideas for programs, policies, data, and feedback. He should often identify other upcoming leaders in his space and engaged them as partners for ideas and action.
4. **Trustworthy**. A transformative leader reflects sobriety and tranquility especially when one approaches him on a personal problem. He should always be prudent in his actions, simple, straightforward, acting with balance and temperance. He embodied a style of life that was concerned for others, especially those most underserved. He was a person of heart and compassion, beyond superficial sentimentalism.
5. **Seeking New Solutions**. Because of their commitment to social justice, transformative leaders seek change. They challenge the status quo. Giroux, (1992) argues that educational leaders have to become engaged and transformative to challenge existing actions in education systems, or they will simply support the norms of inequity. Transformative, effective leadership seeks new solutions to usual institutional problems. The leader always seeks new solutions that lead people to reconsider their assumptions about others, inequity, and how to avoid falling back on old solutions for new issues.
6. **Mentorship Roles**. A leader serves as mentor to stimulate transformational leadership and support positive work attitudes and career expectations of his/her colleagues and students. He/she must be a role model for both colleagues and students and inspire them; he/she needs to challenge both staff and students to take greater possession for their work.

CONCLUSION

Employees come and go – and when someone goes, it can cost the organization dearly in terms of finding and training a replacement, a factor which affects many institutions of higher learning in Kenya. Effective transformational leader in these institutions would seek to lower staff turnover by making people feel more

engaged and included in his area of leadership within the institution. United behind such a leader's vision, employees would more likely to feel like they fit in, like they are sharing the same goals with co-workers, and that they are not lonely. People who match the culture and behaviors of the institution would always tend to stick around, which decreases turnover. Finally, the distinctive character of such a transformational leader is the ability to combine the head and heart, as well as the ability to recognize and effectively apply emotions to connect with and influence subjects. Such a transformational leader would bring in wide-ranging change wherever such leadership is introduced and becomes effective in resolving problems in the learning environs.

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