Leadership Excellence in African Librarianship

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Abstract

“Leadership excellence” is difficult to define since it is dependent on perspectives of affected individuals regarding the quality of engagement with a person who is in a lead position. Hence the paper reviews the generic meaning of leadership excellence and competencies that have been associated with both leadership and excellence. It considers how these meanings may be applied to African Librarianship that is faced with relentless global and societal changes in the cultural, information, knowledge management, policy, financial and service delivery spheres. Questions that will be considered are: who is a leader? What are the generic characteristics of a leader? What leadership characteristics constitute excellence? How may these be developed, nurtured and be sustained? In the process, emerging opportunities for creative approaches to varied societal challenges, library constituencies, by stewards of culture and information, will be explored. Propositions will be made on emerging and potential roles for the development of continental leadership excellence in African librarianship.

INTRODUCTION

Each of us has the potential to be a leader. Being a leader is based on our ability to envision the future and determine those actions that need to be planned for and acted upon consistently to enable the realization of the vision. Each person who has developed this mind set for application in their personal life, learns, grows and attains individual aspirations. Attainment of personal aspirations develops a positive self-concept that builds one’s self-confidence to introspect on personal leadership qualities, competencies and weaknesses. Hence develop moral courage to improve their own capabilities in the areas of weakness or skills needed for accomplishing one’s goals and vision. This resonates with a description of leaders, attributed to John Kotter, being those who “establish the vision for the future and set the strategy for getting there.”
The foundations of leadership are in individual competencies that enable accountability and responsibility for the recognition, profitable use and development of unique innate gifts, that resonate with our spirit and intellectual inclination. Each of us develops a vision for an individual pathway to exploit these gifts in order to fulfill our individual purpose through service. The challenge we face, is dealing constructively with both strengths and weakness, as a method for developing self-management and leadership. Commitment to develop ourselves to a level of competence as individuals, sustain alignment of the individual vision, develop action plans, implement them fulfills ones purpose and in the process develop self-knowledge. Constant review and adjustments of action plans so as to maintain continued relevance and fulfillment of purpose, is the base for self-knowledge and self-leadership. It forms a framework for development of effective personal behavior which each and everyone of us is obliged to take responsibility and be accountable for as we accept develop leadership skills. Leadership occurs at various levels: for ourselves or for others within our families or leadership as one of a team in any venture we undertake whether it be play or work and across all levels in organizations and institutions, locally, nationally and globally.

Leadership skills developed for managing one’s personal life and relationships provide a base for leadership success in professional and organizational life. However, very few people have all-round leadership competencies as an innate skill. Hence we agree with the assertion by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) that “leadership is defined by knowledge, skills and abilities rather than position or title and that core competencies of leadership can be learnt and the learning is a life-long process” (www.aapa.org) “Developing a Culture of Leadership Excellence in the American Academy of Physician Assistants” Adopted 2003, reaffirmed 2008, 2013)

The paper seeks to explore various types of leadership and how they may contribute to leadership excellence in African librarianship. It will explore identified leadership competencies and their relevance as indicators of potential for effective leadership. These will be reviewed in relation to their applicability to the context of service delivery in African libraries. The paper will analyze these to identify areas of success, potential pitfalls based on practice and propose some interventions for lifelong development and nurture of these competencies for African librarianship.

**Leadership: definition and styles**

Leadership has been described as a major factor which contributes immensely to the general well-being of organizations and nations. Leadership is defined as the process of influencing groups of people to achieve goals, whilst a leader is someone who can influence others. (Odumeru, J.A & Ifeanyi G.O., (2013) “Transformational vs Transactional Leadership Theories: Evidence in Literature” www.irmbrjournal 2,2)

Leaders are described as people who make things happen through influencing people to act in support of a vision. There are various categories of leaders:
1. Transformational leader is a pathfinder, a visionary who motivates and inspires people to perform at levels far beyond what has been done before. Transformational leadership enhances the motivation, morale and performance of followers through:
   a. connects with followers’ sense of identity,
   b. provides a role model for followers and challenging to take ownership of their work, whilst acknowledging strengths and weaknesses, capitalizing on the former and facilitating development in weak areas.

This leadership style is characterized by a clear set of values; inspires followers through a well articulated vision and giving meaning to tasks in hand.

It encourages creativity through which obstacles are overcome by followers whilst providing mentorship to followers to enhance their individual growth and development.

2. Transactional leadership, also referred to as managerial leadership, focuses on the role of supervision, organization and group performance. The transactional leader promotes compliance of followers through a “carrot and stick” approach to performance assessment. A transactional leader gets things done with and through other people by focusing on getting specific tasks completed, by paying specific attention to process. Rewards and punishment are tools used to encourage compliance, in order to attain goals.

3. Ascribed leadership is a voluntary form of leadership which is gained by status. These include professional athletes, film stars and musicians. Within work situations ascribed leadership may include people who are conscientious and reliable in contributing to the welfare of the organization and recognized by peers and supervisors alike.

The various types of leadership, described above, share one aspect: the quality of leadership is ascribed by and recognized by observers and those who are affected. Lao Tzu is credited with the following quotation, which is helpful for the understanding of the characteristics of leadership excellence

“To lead people, walk beside them…. A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves’ Lao Tzu

The style of work within librarianship has tended to be dependent on transactional leadership on account of the underlying technical routines which are the bedrock of organization of libraries. With the modern application of technology to these routines, leadership in African librarianship seem to have had difficulties in transforming work goals beyond implementation of routine to in-depth understanding of customer service as the core of “why libraries exist”. Literature on development of African librarianship continues to bemoan inward looking focus of librarians demonstrated by infrequent analysis of customer needs. Where these have been undertaken, follow through is not continuous. Needs analysis and development of plans that address emerging changes are treated as occasional activity, usually as a reaction to observed blockages in the routines.
Thus needs analysis becomes an event rather than a cyclical process. Qualities of transactional leadership, encourage working within existing systems and solve problems through established procedures rather than thinking outside the box. (Odemuru&Ifeanyi, 2013, p.359)

Librarianship should develop cyclical, customer-focused needs analysis process by providing adequate resources, in the form of policy, finance and trained personnel. Justification for the establishment of fully fledged market research and advocacy units within African librarianship have yet to become a norm, since these activities are not easily perceived as a direct fit within library technical processes. Yet, relevance of libraries to society must be assessed continuously and the library services be market - driven, if society has to appreciate the value of libraries and sustain their funding.

Transformational leadership seems to be coming to the fore on account of many factors linked with changing human approaches to life and work as well as the impact of technology on society, in general and specifically in information transfer. The approach to work life has been highly influenced by modern socialization of generations who communicate and exchange information through social media, discuss work content and participate in the evolving work environment. Further, the application of technology in work environments determines the types of workforce skills needed, yet there are not enough people who meet the demand. Hence scarcity leverages attitudes towards work that focus primarily on job satisfaction based on satisfactory responses to the question: “What is in it (this job) for me?” Transformational leadership is better aligned to enabling participation and negotiated work approaches through which extraordinary job performance may be elicited. Further, library organization and procedures are sufficiently well entrenched to provide the framework that provides parameters within which transformational leadership is able to embed. In order for leaders to inspire followers, there should be a vision that appeals to followers to accomplish tasks for the good of the organization within an established framework. However, methods of attaining results are based on intellectual stimulation (rather than slavish application of routines) and development of creative solutions to obstacles. The pre-requisite for successful transition from transactional to transformational leadership is personnel who have a sound appreciation of the philosophy, principles and values of the profession of librarianship as well as being self-assured in their self-worth. All of these are qualities that are closely linked with character traits and competencies of individuals.

**Leadership Competencies**

The definition for competencies that is adopted for this presentation is based on the one proposed by Giesecke and McNeil (in : Ammons-Stephens et.al. ibid.p65) that “competencies are skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to an individual’s success in a particular position”. The focus in this case is on leadership.
Leadership has been said to consist of character traits and that it requires moral effort in self-discipline to withstand temptation to compromise on quality in what one does. (Kotter, John) Qualities of leadership are more learnt than being innate to individuals, hence each person is capable to be a leader, if they choose to behave and act in alignment with principles that govern one to consistently take personal responsibility and accountability in all undertakings.

Most literature addressing leadership competencies provide lists which attempt to capture the characteristics, qualities of leaders and the way they achieve successful visions, based on experience, lessons learned in practice and knowledge of seasoned leaders. These lists seek to provide a guiding framework for the benefit of others and organizations or institutions. (Robert Stuerst & Barbara Moran, Library Management (3rd ed) Littleton, Colo: Libraries Limited, 1987, p.69). Generic competencies are used as a predictor of successful leadership for those who learn, adopt in practice and apply them appropriately in context of the institution’s philosophy and principles.

Ammons- Stephens et.al ibid. developed a core competency model for leadership in librarianship, summarized under the following headings:

1. Cognitive ability: which includes problem solving, decision making and reflective thinking
2. Vision encompassing forward thinking, ability to think globally, creatively and foster innovation
3. Interpersonal effectiveness which include good communication and listening skills that foster respect; responsibility, accountability, and team building whilst inspiring individuals to succeed through individual learning, training and mentorship
4. Managerial effectiveness which focuses on thoughtful and efficient ways of managing people, resources, strategic planning and change
5. Personal attributes: these consist mainly of character traits that enable leaders to deal with people honestly, fairly, with humility and be willing to learn from others and have integrity

Whilst a core competency model is helpful in providing guidelines for characteristics that contribute to good leadership, it however does not facilitate implementation and practical application within an organization. There is an assumption that each trait grouping contributes to effective leadership. However, the various contexts in which leaders in librarianship operate have unpredictable influence in leadership effectiveness and efficiency. Competency models seem to be helpful as a benchmark for personal introspection and setting of individual development goals towards self improvement as a leader; performance assessment of leaders and are useful for recruitment processes.
Leadership Excellence

Excellence in leadership is indicated by effective development and application of competencies needed for successful implementation of a vision, as assessed by all stakeholders.

Leadership excellence builds on persistent implementation of actions that align with a stated vision, whilst taking into consideration all factors that either present challenges or provide opportunities that hinder or facilitate alignment with and realization of ultimate goals, be they personal or professional. The challenges and opportunities that face humanity are rooted in constant change and new information that impacts on planned actions. There is thus a demand regular monitoring, review and revision of strategic plans and putting into action necessary re-alignment iteratively, in order to attain one’s vision.

Thus leadership excellence is based on self-discipline and persistence in implementing required competencies for one’s responsibility and accountability. (Brian Tracy.& Peter Chee (2013) Twelve Disciplines of Leadership Excellence)

In order to attain leadership excellence, African librarianship needs to focus on development of a sustained user-focused climate on account of the challenges emanating from multilingualism that is accompanied by lack of reading materials in the mother tongue. However, there are opportunities that derive from the extensive use of cell phones as an oral communication tool and short message transmission. Leadership concerned with creative and innovative solutions to nurturing reading may develop appropriate solutions if they work with software developers keen to facilitate reading. Library technical and routine processes are valuable tools for achieving goals. Leadership need to constantly review processes in relation to how well they provide services that are valued by customers. If these tools contribute to user support, thoughtful analysis of processes under different scenarios is required to facilitate appropriate decision and follow up action. Risk taking is encouraged through strategic thinking and benchmarking against appropriate standards for development of the best library service solutions. All these activities may be accomplished only if there is competent leadership.

On the basis of assessment of literature on effective leadership across varied professional fields, leadership excellence in libraries suggest that library leaders need to be empowered with the following competencies:

1. The ability for the leader to be visionary and to anticipate the future that is being influenced by the ever-changing technological developments and applications to knowledge.

2. Success in this responsibility requires expertise in all aspects of strategic planning, development and implementation of action plans;

3. Monitoring, and iterative evaluation and feed back revisions into the strategic plan cycle
4. Inspire significant others to appreciate and adopt the vision and necessary strategies to attain the goal

5. Good communicator and listener to stakeholders: within the library, the institution and nationally

Practice in the library as a workplace is built upon learned professional expertise in a preferred or assigned and well-defined aspect of professional knowledge. Progression within the practice will normally depend upon an individual’s own on-the-job self-confidence and good practice in time management, delivery of accurate out-puts, within a narrowly defined aspect. Progression into leadership responsibilities is normally built upon successful delivery within a defined area of professional expertise.

Competencies required for effective operation in the incremental development of a leadership role are rarely overtly included within the process of progression as part of in-service training or systemic process. Within library education programs, leadership theories, styles and functions are generally offered as part of the curriculum. However, lack of application in the early career stages, erodes the learned theoretical knowledge. Thus there is a need for short/ in-service courses to update this knowledge with a view to empower emerging leaders to apply the knowledge in a given environments, inclusive of engagement with different units to achieve overall objectives that satisfy customer needs.

The following basic leadership areas of operation are needed as a new leader takes on incremental responsibility for the core basic and cooperative service provision in any library. Yet, systems for training in these areas are rarely provided within library curricula or practice within the work place: staff are expected to have innate skills for:

i. working with others,
ii. team building,
iii. motivating and empowering others
iv. conflict management
v. conduct of meetings
vi. strategic thinking

All of these skills require, as a base, self-knowledge and other people’s motivation and styles of how they work. Self-knowledge can not be taken for granted. Even where people believe they know their strengths and weaknesses, perception of outsiders will enhance aspects of self-knowledge. It is therefore an area of training that demands assisted learning within the work place or through release courses. However, people in general or in professional lives rarely undergo processes of formal character self-assessment and analysis of interactive styles. Such an analysis is not included in general or professional education courses. Librarianship is a predominantly interactive profession, thus there is a need to include assessments that enhance appreciation of individual communication and work styles to enhance interactive understanding and organizational interactions. The context in which African librarianship operates is influenced by self-
effacement and reticence as protocols for interacting with supervisors and seniority of all types. These characteristics have an influence on organizational operations and performance and need to be addressed formally.

Self-management at the level of library operations, usually focuses on competency within narrow domains. Promotion to leadership responsibility tends to be perceived by the promoted personnel in a linear rather than holistic fashion. Further, there is a tendency to re-enforce efficiency in the area of expertise rather than appreciate the wider span of control and expanded role for communicating with team members, organizing and planning work processes whilst coaching them in areas of need. It is not unusual for a newly appointed leader to experience difficulties in embracing their management role, for various reasons including social relationship issues such as fear of being isolated from colleagues and loss of camaraderie with former co-workers. Neglect of systemic development of transit processes from a narrow to a wider span of responsibility creates a gap that sets a stage for ineffectiveness, not only of the individual but also that of the team, the unit and ultimately the organization. Development of holistic leadership skills empowers emerging leaders to appreciate how an extended portfolio of responsibility relates to the entire organization. Through this approach competencies in development of partnerships, cooperative efforts and purposeful professional networking enhance higher order skills that encourage leadership excellence.

Leadership excellence emanates from paying attention to and addressing systemic blockages. This is through observation of impact of service on customer satisfaction, analysis of personnel needs and development of personnel support systems through mentorship, coaching and training in personal skills development for operational effectiveness and enhancement of self-worth.

**Library Associations and leadership excellence**

Development of effective library associations is dependent upon the incorporation of sustained foundational characteristics of quality leadership such as: visioning, communication through strategic planning, marketing, advocacy, development of life long learning programs for the membership, as well as crafting a fruitful business model. All of these are inter linked and contribute to establishing a sustainable and nurturing culture for leadership excellence. At the heart of a successful association is the vision of a self-sustaining, self renewing organization that adds value to its members through providing quality life-long learning systems, that respond to member needs and fulfill personal development interests in support of envisioned personal growth. Coherence of strategic planning processes with a business model that supports the association ultimately contribute to sustainability and autonomy of an association and freedom from external pressures. A number of African library associations have embarked upon excellent training programs at leadership level. Pitfalls that mar implementation and need to be reviewed are the manner in which training needs analyses are assessed. There is room for inclusivity in both inputs on priority of training programs and determination of selection criteria by the general membership, in order to align training programs with customer needs from various cohorts and types of library types. In this way trainees are legitimately
required to take responsibility and make commitments to not only personal gain but also for sharing knowledge with peers and provide inspiration and mentorship to colleagues.

Co-learning across generational expertise is another avenue for empowerment within the collegial environment that is characteristic of library associations, where it is not the position that counts but unique skills and knowledge held by individual members. Such learning is encouraged by the plethora of digital technologies and social media applications to customer focused library services. However, for such programs to embed within library associations, the following culture needs to act as a guide for all members:

1. Engagement: Each member of a Library Association need to develop a sense of member commitment and social responsibility to contribute to the well being of the association through active participation, demonstrable through output for which a member is accountable, in one aspect whether as a peer or leader. Action plans for any strategy must clearly identify who accomplishes what action; who monitors, evaluates and who drive iterative revision of plans

2. Communication: Clear communication tools and feedback mechanisms that enable shared understanding of the association vision

3. Coordination: Cohesive library associations develop and coordinate mission maps that indicate all which needs to be accomplished if the organization has to realize the vision and accomplish its mission. All activities should be continuously updated as various tasks are completed. A clear outline of opportunities and challenges yet to be tackled be provided for information for all

Adoption of such guidelines will not only facilitate life long learning but also self confidence that enhances leadership development opportunities, based on peer learning and development of professional competencies and attainment of leadership excellence in the long run.

Conclusion

The presentation has analyzed leadership styles and competencies that may be helpful towards developing some aspects of leadership excellence. It has discussed select areas in which individual leadership development may assist in leveraging or enhancing existing levels of leadership to excellence. Limitations have been the absence of research in this aspect of practice. Hence the presentation draws from the presenter’s experience and benefitted from anecdotes from colleagues who work within librarianship. Thanks are due to AfLIA Organizers for setting the stage that enables African Librarians to reflect on the potential for developing leadership excellence. The morsels shared invite contributions through research that may enable transformational leadership to re-enforce the foundational transactional leadership that provides continuity of efficient organizational processes, but inadequate for transforming into systemic customer-focused services in volatile information era. Since AfLIA is at its early developmental stages, the presentation proposes guidelines that may strengthen library association developments such that leadership excellence might evolve through the development of a culture of responsibility and accountability among committed members of African library associations.
References


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