The information Society: The role of Transformational leadership in the African Library

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** Professional growth, innovation and major breakthrough in all spheres of endeavor rest on the provision of cutting edge leadership. Library science as a career is experiencing major shifts in terms of innovation technology and convergence with other professions. There have been competing voices from other related professions, on addressing the issue affecting the information society. This therefore poses a challenge for libraries to position the involved stakeholders to remain relevant in an ever-changing society, that has experienced unprecedented growth in technology, convergence of culture, and what Thomas Friedman would call the flattening of the world.

The paper aims at demonstrating the leadership roles that need to be visible among Librarians in Africa, in order to forge innovation and even affect policy making within our respective countries.

**Design/Approach:** This paper will answer the following questions; how ready is the library in Africa ready to provide leadership in an ever evolving information landscape; what is the importance of the Librarian in Africa in asserting him/herself in the information society landscape; what are the traits of library leaders required for this information society.

**Findings:** Factors such as transformational leadership, change management, people management, information-savvy innovativeness and collaborative consortia strategies were identified as vital in order for the African library to swiftly adapt to the dynamic environment of the information society whilst remaining relevant and matching the standards of modern libraries in the developed continents.

**Value:** The value of the paper lies in the identification and proposition of strategies, which leaders of academic libraries can adopt in preventing or reversing the decline of their libraries and, the recognition of transformational leadership as the route to library leaders ensuring the African library remains relevant in the information society.

**Paper type:** Viewpoint

An analysis of selected academic and leading research institutions in Kenya will form a basis of this paper.

*Keywords: library science; library leadership; innovation; information society, KLISC.*
Introduction

The survival of libraries in Africa is gradually becoming dependent on the capability to adopt change and reflect dynamism. The information society has a level ground for industry players like the Web, libraries, documentation centers and learning resource centers. The decline of library’s popularity as the most preferred place to go for learners and researchers is pegged to factors such as convenience and immediacy of access to information. Leadership and management of libraries is the key to ensuring sustainability and relevance by spearheading change. As agents of change leaders can borrow from strategies in the private sector on transformational leadership so as to swiftly adopt new technology and procedures than can make the library an equal player in this age of competition in the information society. This paper focuses on strides taken in Kenyan libraries by leaders.

Change management is a key leadership role that has not yet been embraced by many managers of libraries. A past study by Demos (2003, p. 19) found that “leadership was the most frequently cited development need identified in the stakeholder interviews”. Kent (1996, p. 213), asserts that one of the requisites for public libraries to “survive and prosper” is “solid and sound leadership”. The author emphasizes the fact that libraries need rational, opinionated and well-articulated leadership if they are to flourish in a digital future. According to Kent (1996), true leadership is difficult in an institutional culture that abhors change, which is not an exceptional situation in most libraries today. The library is a key player in the information society in passing knowledge to individuals and communities; this denotes that leadership qualities of those managing libraries should also be exceptional so as to be productive on matters demanding articulation of vision and direction for ideal library service provision. Knott (1997, p. 30) suggest that the practice of librarianship is fundamentally a process of leadership. There is limited research and publication to document the case studies of effective library leadership taking place.

Library leaders as agents of change

Libraries today exist in a dynamic environment that embraces technological changes, legislation changes and economic changes. Africa suffers most from economic changes evidenced by currency fluctuations which in different ways affects library acquisitions. For libraries to be sustainable in the wake of dynamism and technological advancements there needs to be reliable leadership to help manage the change. Wood (2007), argues that the position of the library in Africa is under threat and this is characterized by an adamant decline in purchasing power. He adds that academic libraries are continually diminishing in influence within their organizations and also progressively becoming incapable of competing with other providers of information in the society.

Innovation has brought about systems that enhance efficient service delivery and virtual access of library resources. This further necessitates leaders to manage the change process. Academic Libraries in Kenya have over the past ten years experienced a shift from conventional library service delivery to automated systems that integrate circulation services, information search and electronic document delivery to a one stop shop. The
libraries have implemented library management systems, security enhancement systems, biometric identification systems, digitization facilities and other innovative technology to match the standards of modern libraries in developed countries. These dynamic shifts have been propagated by library leaders who work together through the national library consortium- Kenya Library and Information Science Consortium (KLISC). The national consortium envisages a library community that embraces technological advancements in the industry and is well able to compete in the information society. Among the consortium’s strategic objectives are developing sustainable governance capacity by enhancing leadership and management skills. This is done by organizing workshops and seminars to enhance leadership and management skills. Through the leadership of the consortium, change management is actualized by developing advocacy plans to enhance innovative technologies and ICT infrastructure in member libraries.

Change management by individual library leaders entails preparing staff and users to swiftly embrace innovative advancements in the library. The leaders as agents of change ought to encourage library staff who might be affected with the transformation from manual to automated systems, to enroll in training programs that can keep them relevant in the job. According to Pors, (2003) academic libraries in Denmark developed an organizational design that fosters development of leadership competencies to enable libraries to identify and implement changes in library services.

**Transformational Leadership**

The transformation in library and information services demands intrepid leadership. Within the profession, we see excitement for boundless possibilities, mingled with apprehension about which directions to pursue. There is enthusiasm for implementing new systems, residing uncomfortably close to nostalgia for the old days. The library leaders we serve are eager to test their competence in managing these diverse reactions within themselves and their staff, while occasionally having their own fears about being up to the task (Schreiber and Shanon; 2008). Today’s libraries are challenged to deliver results that demonstrate how they make a difference in the communities they serve. And this mandate comes at a time of increasing technological and economical challenge (Todaro; 2007).

An analysis of Kenyan University libraries gathered that transformational leadership is vital to achieving success on any projects libraries undertake today. These include implementation of new systems, new library buildings, organizational restructure and even decision making processes that relate to emerging technologies. When libraries undergo transformation a lot of decisions are bound to be made ranging from the type of facilities to acquire, the procedures of getting funding, to inevitable layoffs to be made or possible restructuring. The outcome of such decisions relies entirely on the agility of the leaders.

This viewpoint is presented based on a content analysis of journal literature, considering the research, discussion, and documented examples of librarians and library organizations in providing leadership. A critical viewpoint on Kenyan academic libraries shows that
most transformations take long or even fail to take off because leaders are not in the
correct frame of mind to spearhead change. Empowerment is vital for leaders who are
tasked with projects that involve overhauling existing systems and procedures. This is
such as enrolling them in short courses of leadership management and change
management. The gap between libraries in the developed countries and African libraries is
penned to readiness to adapt the transformative and revolutionary developments whilst
managing change.

Leadership in Perspective

Leading Is Organic

Leadership is largely viewed as a discovery process. Each new dilemma we encounter
informs us about what we need to learn next. Leaders need to cultivate a welcoming
attitude toward leadership problems. There are models and theories to guide each person’s
development, but ultimately each of us must learn to lead by analyzing a situation,
developing a plan, and getting into action. We learn from the results of our attempt to
exert influence. Experience is the best teacher. It is from our magnificent failures that we
learn the most valuable lessons. The library leaders we most respect are those who have
been bold enough to have some failures, and who are willing to share the lessons they
have learned.

Involvement Leads to Commitment

That focused involvement leads to commitment, is common good sense that leaders can
easily overlook its guidance, and often do. Consultants always build in opportunities for
involvement; and, as leadership trainers, they design experiential learning into every
program. The core belief is that involving individuals in decisions that directly impact
their lives opens the door to their sense of professionalism, accountability, and
commitment to succeed. Each participant is expected to define his or her personal learning
goals, and pursue them to successful conclusion.

Libraries are reinventing themselves as content becomes more accessible online and their
role becomes less about custodianship and more about connecting learners and
constructing knowledge. The opportunities and strengths are there, but the academic
library must promote and market its potential to obtain a clear political decision to
develop beyond its usual periphery that is documentation. Defining a new organizational
strategy may take time. According to a case study of the innovation learning center on the
campus of the Scientific and Technological University of Lille, France it took three years
to convince several kinds of stakeholders, such as the library staff, research management,
scholars and students, local authorities, companies and excellence clusters, before the
faculty settled the main objectives and allocated a budget. This basically reflects the
extent to which libraries have lost influence in the society and even their parent
organizations.
Rationale for Leadership for the Library in Africa

The Image Problem

According to Abott (1998) the future of librarianship thus hinges on what happens to the perpetually changing work of the profession in its three contexts: the context of larger social and cultural forces, the context of other competing occupations, and the context of competing organizations and commodities (Abott, 1998, p 3).

Librarianship is defined in the Macquarie Dictionary as ‘a profession concerned with organizing collections of books and related materials in libraries and of making those resources available to readers and others’. This characterization points to the traditional functions of the librarian in the selection, acquisition, organisation and provision or delivery of books, information and knowledge to a community of readers or users. This definition does not take into account the ‘larger social and cultural forces’ which have transformed the nature of information through technology, the mass media and the internet. It restricts librarians to books.

Organizations in transitions

Organizations in transition need special care and feeding. Individuals in transitional roles must be aware of and pay close attention to these needs. People are naturally anxious about transition and what it means for their particular job or role. Transitional environments are rife with questions, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown. What will happen next? How will I fit in? How will the trajectory of the organization significantly change and, if so, how? Leadership transitions, according to Gilmore, need attention because they involve periods of destabilization including “times of reduced performance and vulnerability to outside forces” (Gilmore, 1988, p. 24).

He correctly points out that these transitions are often underinvested and ill planned by the organization. This is particularly common in leadership transitions at the highest level including heads of research libraries because campus administration typically delegates decision making to the head without regard for orientation and training to prepare for the move through the transition. Deans and interim deans of libraries (and other collegiate units) have to develop their own strategies for all aspects of their entry and passage through the initial, but crucial, time in the leadership role.

The blurred boundaries surrounding the profession of librarianship and the changing nature of information are just some of the factors contributing to what has been described in the introduction to this paper as a professional identity crisis. Apart from the numerous websites devoted to challenging traditional stereotypes and attempting to reveal the ‘funky’ side of the otherwise boring librarian, other websites deal more directly with what is referred to within the profession as the ‘image problem’ (Marinelli and Baker, 2000)

Ray offers concrete suggestions to help postmodern librarians and libraries adjust to the turbulent changes of the postmodern condition. Postmodern libraries, she writes, need flexible and open boundaries and clear missions. They need to focus on relationships
(internal and external) and communities. And finally, they need to focus on learning as the organizing principle (Ray, 2001, p 253). The qualities and competencies called for in the 21st century librarian, therefore, are flexibility, vision, the ability to think critically yet synthetically, to form partnerships, to collaborate, to continue learning and to teach others. We need to shift our professional focus from the traditional ‘guardian of knowledge’ to the more modern ‘intermediary’ to that of the postmodern ‘enabler.’

Succession Planning for Library Leaders of the Future

According to Sarah and Walker (2012), there are several levels of succession planning. At one end of the spectrum, a basic succession plan may include plans to develop leadership skills for all employees throughout the library. This type of plan develops “bench strength” – it creates an organization of employees who are leaders in their respective positions and who may be ready to take on additional leadership responsibilities if needed. In the middle of the spectrum, a succession plan may include identifying a group of higher performing employees with leadership potential and preparing them for future vacancies. On the far side of the spectrum, a highly specialized succession plan may include only preparing a few top candidates for specific key leadership positions.

People Management and Employee Engagement

The future of libraries is a topic possibly as old as libraries themselves. However, it is a particularly pertinent subject at the moment when so many libraries – and librarians – face the triple threats of digital obsolescence, undervaluing of professional skills and underinvestment in physical infrastructure (Law, 2014). This therefore implies that libraries in Africa have to be in the frontline in managing talent and ensuring that their diverse workforce is fully engaged in meeting the goals of their respective organization through librarianship. People are the most important asset for an organization. According to a survey by KPMG (2012), people matters are among the top five concerns for business leaders (Eyre, 2012).

Many libraries in Africa face budget constraints. If librarians want to be seen as experts, then their expertise has to be visible (Dempsey, 2012). This also implies developing our users. Again the library has a potentially powerful role in helping users to deal with information and the systems which manage it. As library managers, we could use the following tips as enumerated by Smith (2008) to enhance the people management platform.

1. Think and look outside the methods and approaches that have been habitually used to select and recruit people. Do not discard tried and tested methods just for the sake of innovation, but be prepared to look at new approaches and new ideas.

2. Take time and be careful in identifying what is required in any role under consideration and what is sought in a person who can successfully take on that role.
Describe roles carefully and thoroughly (while getting the balance right between broad description of the role and a useful amount of detail). Think thoroughly about what qualifications, skills, abilities and attributes are required to successfully carry out the role and describe these clearly.

3. Search widely for potential employees and move outside traditional boundaries. Advertise vacancies in newspapers and electronic listings of job vacancies but also tap into professional networks – formal and informal – to publicize vacancies and to seek potential employees.

4. Consider alternatives to standard modes of employment – for example consider offering opportunities for people to take on a role on a temporary secondment from their ongoing employment.

These among others can serve as very crucial issues to consider when managing people.

**Sustainability and positioning for development**

According to researchers in the business field most companies that have ineffective leadership end up in downfall or near downfall. Failure of an organization can be attributed to a number of factors such as lack or resources, poor management, poor decision making, lack of good will and insubordination. Finkelstein (2003, p2) argues that leaders should not look for easy answers for the decline of organizations. He gives an instance of academic libraries where it is easy for leaders in libraries to blame the managers of universities which are their parent organizations or for lack of funding, while it would be good to acknowledge and accept that the leaders of libraries also contribute in the decline of the specific departmental objectives that translate to the general objectives of the organization. Accepting this responsibility puts leaders in a position to take decisive action to reverse the decline.

Finkelstein (2003), notes that leaders of academic libraries face the enormous challenge of maintaining a balance between the present expectations of delivering services to current users and the future expectations of designing appropriate products and services for the client of the future). It would be catastrophic to only focus on the present for any library as was in the past since the dynamic environment will at some point render it irrelevant.

According to Kargo (2002, p.411) African university libraries are at a crucial stage of their evolution. There is pressure and competition created by these technological innovations, networks, user demands, and the increased demand or information requirements of the new age. These changes demand new missions, goals, objectives, organization structure and managerial skills. African university libraries are therefore compelled to re-examine their very existence in academia and justify the need for their services. Academic libraries in Africa are faced with global challenges of environmental changes or evolution and also unique challenges that make it even more difficult for them to respond appropriately to the evolving environment. Kargbo asserts that there are common challenges the African academic library carries from their parent organizations:
African universities are compounded by huge problems, which range from lack of funds, leading to shortage of book and non-book material in the library, inadequate lack of basic services such as water, electricity, reliable communication systems, inadequate infrastructure, maintenance and technical facilities, to low staff salaries and a brain drain (Kargbo, 2002, p. 412).

There is need for strong leadership values to counter some of these challenges from the Library management level. This can be through assessing opportunities of funding like grants and project partnerships from the western donor agencies. For the recent past Governments in Eastern African region have been seen to get more involved in higher education investment as a future path to job creation. There have been partnerships between universities and Governments that greatly benefit libraries, being recognized as the center of learning and therefore the heart of the institutions. However, leaders of libraries ought to diversify their project funding sources and avoid relying entirely on the scarce Government funding. In Kenya for instance Kenyatta University and Moi University which are two of the country’s big public universities have been granted approval by the Kenyan Government to engage private investors in expanding their facilities or acquiring modern technological infrastructure. The permission is part of a larger government plan to draw on private capital to plug a growing infrastructure financing deficit which in this case inhibits growth of universities. The need to attract external funding can be embraced by African libraries and library leaders can front such ideas through their associations.

**Collaborative leadership through Consortia and Associations**

Libraries in Kenya benefit from consortia deals with international publishers and aggregators of online subscriptions. This is a clear example of how collaborations can surmount to great success. The analysis of Kenyan university libraries shows that a step is being taken towards the direction of collaborative leadership. KLISC which is the national consortium seeks to develop a sustainable governance capacity though which effective leadership can trickle down to member libraries. The able leadership of the consortium operates on several strategic objectives to ensure libraries in Kenya achieve transformation together and the library remains relevant in the society. They hold seminars where they purpose to empower member libraries to provide access to affordable information resources

The leadership of national consortiums should align their strategic objectives to capture issues of effective library governance, sustainability and growth, collaboration and partnership with donor organizations and innovative technologies. In order to make the African library remain relevant consortia can show strong leadership by empowering member libraries with initiatives such as enhancing access to e-resources by negotiating affordable prices for member libraries without financial muscle; developing a framework for advocacy and marketing of emerging innovative technology and infrastructure among all libraries so as to keep up with standards in modern libraries and finally enhancing leadership and management skills of librarians through talks, seminars and workshops.
Effective leadership key to library development

Leader qualities are measured in terms of activity categories which may include strategies for influencing the environment, managerial role activities, professional involvement, membership in committees and management of organizational change. Good library leaders are supposed to be keen enough to sense what is emerging in the revolutionary library industry. They ought to be part of this change by riding with the change and not just managing it. Peter Drucker a seasoned Leadership speaker maintained that “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” This can be used by library leaders who take charge of projects that puts them responsible for allocated funds. Responsibility of library leaders involves effective use of financial resources at their disposal so as to achieve objectives of the projects being undertaken.

![Diagram of LEADERSHIP IN LIBRARIES]

*Figure 1.* The figure above summarizes the idea behind leadership in libraries factoring the characteristics of a good leader.
The role of Leadership in African Libraries in this revolutionary information society can be equated to an environment monitory role whereby library leaders are responsible for perusing the environment for new opportunities to improve services and operations. They are also tasked with keeping up with professional trend and technological developments. According to Versoza (2009) a retired archivist at De La Salle University library, leaders of libraries are supposed to assume an entrepreneur role of initiating controlled change in the library, planning and implementing change in the library and solving problems by instituting needed changes in the library. With good leadership in the library comes higher readership.

**Leadership in managing Disruptive technology**

Christensen’s Theory of Disruptive Technologies predicts that mainstream organizations and industries can be made obsolete by new technologies that change the whole paradigm of the industries in which they operate. According to Christensen (2000), mainstream, established, well-managed and successful firms fail when newcomers selling inferior but more modern and scalable technology enter the market. This theory reffates to the information society which is faced with growing technological advancements which when adopted provide competition to industry players who remain manual. Christensen asserts that Disruptive technologies usually start with very limited functionality and usually appeal only to a very limited market. They are cheap and not very profitable (e.g. early personal computers, desktop copiers). Mainstream companies ignore them because they are marginal but over time the disruptive technology improve their functionality and appeal to a broader market. When eventually the technology is widely acceptable the mainstream companies lose their market. This situation is similar to libraries which lose users to Cyber cafes and the Web.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Libraries in Africa ought to maximize the potential of dynamism that is brought about by growing development in the region. Leaders of libraries need to appreciate their role as agents of change and spearhead transformation and revolution to place the library industry back to the top of the information society. Transformational leadership is the way to go in order to remain relevant and be sustainable with the economic fluctuations in the continent. Libraries across Africa should also invest in consortia and associations to enhance leadership capacity building and empowerment for future library leaders and sustainability of the industry as a whole. The national consortia of the different countries should formulate strategic objectives and emphasize on leadership effectiveness so as to objectively and successfully manage change within member libraries that is necessitated by the dynamic industry.

Ultimately because the information society reacts to environmental changes, library leaders are called upon to stay abreast with technological and innovative advancements and purpose to be information-savvy innovators who view trends and emerging technologies critically before making decisions.
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