Impact of leadership styles on employee engagement and conflict management practices in Nigerian universities

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This study explores how leadership styles impact work engagement and conflict management practices in Nigerian universities. It utilises a qualitative research design, focusing on 40 semi-structured interviews with senior university management staff comprising Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, Deans of Faculties and senior non-teaching staff (i.e. chief librarians) of some selected institutions. The findings reveal cultural values shaping the choice of authoritative, transactional and transformational leadership styles were commonly adopted. Results further indicate how Nigerian academic institutions and processes are considered as being overly bureaucratic and transactional. Additionally, some context-specific norms were found to influence leadership functions impacting work engagement and conflict management practices. In summary, the study suggests practice and policy implications that can enhance the direction and development of effective leadership in this context.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been substantial growth in the number of universities in Nigeria. An essential factor in the growth has been the liberalisation of the higher education sector, creating business opportunities for wealthy individuals and corporate investors that satisfy licensing criteria set by the Nigerian Government through its regulatory body, the National Universities Commission (Obasi, 2007). The rapid growth in the university system has been seen as a response to resolving some challenges encountered by Nigerian universities established in earlier times, including inadequate funding, corruption, student cultism, deteriorating infrastructure, examination malpractices, labour strikes, and declining teaching and research standards. Given the rapid increase in the numbers of universities, there is a need for universities as institutions to optimally engage their strategic internal and external resources to be able to obtain and maintain top academic performances and profit maximisation. For Uwazurike (1991) and Ebura, Udida, Ekpiken and Bassey (2009), good leadership must be prioritised as an essential part of the process of coordinating teaching, learning, research and other ancillary responsibilities of a university. Several studies on leadership posit that leadership styles have an impact on work involvement levels. Since the concept of leadership is also interpreted as interpersonal influences that a person in charge exerts in getting others to follow, leadership styles adopted in managing workplace conflicts is also integral in shaping organisational behaviour.

However, in spite of the abundance of Western literature on leadership, little is known about the impact of university leadership styles or leadership behavioural realities within Sub-Saharan African states, and its impact on employee relations management. A significant number of studies examining leadership styles in universities are focused primarily on developed nations, while similar studies from developing economies with different cultural contexts are scarce, for instance, Connor, Carvalho and White's (2014) research paper on the extent to which leadership of higher education is a universally positive or contingent experience. Comparative data was gleaned from interviews with senior positional leaders in Australian, Irish and Portuguese universities. Another qualitative study by Enke (2014) "engaged women senior administrators at liberal arts colleges in the Upper Midwestern USA to better understand how their intersecting identities mediate their enacted leadership" roles. Therefore, this study seeks to unfold the importance of understanding leadership impact on employee relations management from a non-Western context. Our centre of attention in this study is to fill the research gap in the literature by making a significant contribution toward our understanding of the leadership styles adopted by Nigerian university management in controlling university processes, and its implications for how employee relations are managed.

Research question

Consequently, the research question of this study is as follows: How do leadership styles impact work engagement and conflict management practices in Nigerian universities? Thus, the main objectives of study are: first, identify context-specific leadership practices that university management use to lead members of staff, and second, to unveil the extent to which perceived leadership styles impact work engagement and conflict resolution practices.

Literature review

Leadership is a widely studied topic, considered integral to the performance of organisations, managers and employees (Sudha, Shahnawaz & Farhat, 2016). Although the definition of leadership as a concept is disputed, in its broadest sense, leadership is defined as a relationship through which an individual or group influences the behaviour and actions of others. Leadership theorists have proposed different theories of leadership styles impacting organisational behaviour. Mullins and Christy (2013) defined leadership styles as specific methods in which leadership functions are achieved, arising from ways managers typically behave towards subordinates. Historically, various classical theorists in the field of leadership have conceptualised different dimensions of describing leadership styles. For example, leadership studies undertaken by the Bureau of Business at Ohio University in the 1950s suggested two dimensions to leadership styles, namely consideration and initiation of structure (Halpin & Winer, 1957). Consideration was proposed as the extent to which a leader establishes rapport and trust with subordinates, while initiation of structure is the degree to which a leader set expectations and structures the roles of subordinates in achieving set goals. However, the well-known transactional and transformational leadership theories (Burns, 2003; Bass, 1990) are dominant models

in leadership research. Transactional leadership style is identified as focusing on basic management processes of controlling, organising, and planning tasks based on rewards and punishments (Bass, 1990). The transformational style places emphasis on a leader stimulating and inspiring followers to achieve higher levels of performance (Burns, 2003).

Mullins and Christy (2013) asserted that "there have been consistent views expressed in the literature that a major variable influencing the choice of leadership style may be national culture". Apart from the pioneering research of Geert Hofstede (1980) who conducted one of the most compendious studies in the 1980s on how values in the workplace are influenced by national cultures, another influential work that is relevant to this present study is the *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness* (GLOBE) conceived in 1991 by Robert House of the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004). House et al. carried out a cross-cultural GLOBE study on 951 organisations in 62 countries across the world. The significant findings from GLOBE which draws from Hofstede's cultural typology is that leadership functions are contextual and embedded in societal values and beliefs of leaders and those being led. Thus, the definitions and perceptions ascribed to leadership considerably vary from culture to culture.

Building on Hofstede's work, GLOBE found nine cultural dimensions, such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, human orientations, institutional collectivism, individual collectivism, assertiveness, gender egalitarianism, future and performance orientations emerged as capturing the resemblance and/or variance in values, traditions and norms influencing leadership styles of different societies (House et al., 2004). Using these cultural dimensions, the GLOBE researchers were able to group countries into regional clusters. Each cluster had interpretations specific to their region's values, history and shared cultural understanding of leadership behaviours. For instance, countries grouped under the Sub-Saharan Africa cluster sharing culturally related perceptions of leadership practices included South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Building on these venerable foundations, the present study intends to contextually explore the impact of leadership style on employee engagement and conflict management practices in Nigerian universities. Both constructs (i.e. work engagement and conflict management) are two areas that, if leadership responsibilities are neglected, can lead to reduced work cohesion and negative workplace relationships.

Work engagement and conflict management in context

Academic interest in work engagement can be traced to Kahn's (1990) work where work engagement was defined as "the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles, by which they employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance". Schhaufeli and Bakker (2004) considered work engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption". The term 'vigour' is characterised to imply an individual's high level of proactive display and mental tenacity while working. 'Dedication' alludes to a sense of significance, feeling of enthusiasm, attachment and pride in one's work, while 'absorption' creates the idea that engaged employees are so happy and

engrossed with work that time passes quickly and unnoticed. However, Fearon, McLaughlin and Morris (2013) criticised work engagement as a concept perceived by some as a "jangle fallacy" and a mere rebranding of work psychology theories such as employee motivation, job satisfaction and work empowerment. Eldor (2016) contested that many organisations are taking the issue of work empowerment seriously. This is because it has been found not only to create a fulfilling employee-organisation relationship, but also it sought to give added value beyond the boundaries of the workplace, to enrich other significant areas in an employee's work-life balance. Importantly, work empowerment, if adequately managed, creates a rewarding relationship by allowing employees to express themselves free of any interpersonal conflict.

However, where interpersonal conflicts exist between two or more individuals, it can create an atmosphere of concealment and animosity that can potentially weaken work engagement. Conflicts can range from small disagreements to more significant altercations in the workplace leading to withholding information, invading people's privacy and the fearful feelings of antagonism (Middents, 1990). Workplace conflicts involve social exchanges whereby an individual or group exhibits verbal aggression, unacceptable personality traits, irritations and other forms of adversarial actions intended to complicate relationships. Apparently, someone experiencing animosity and obstruction arising from interpersonal conflicts with their managers and co-workers is less likely to be satisfied at work than someone who is not having to deal with interpersonal negativity. If functioning efficiently in the workplace, conflict management abilities are integral prerequisites. Although some scholars have conceptualised various conflict management models, a classical conflict resolution typology is highlighted in Figure 1, as developed by two psychologists, Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in the 1970s.
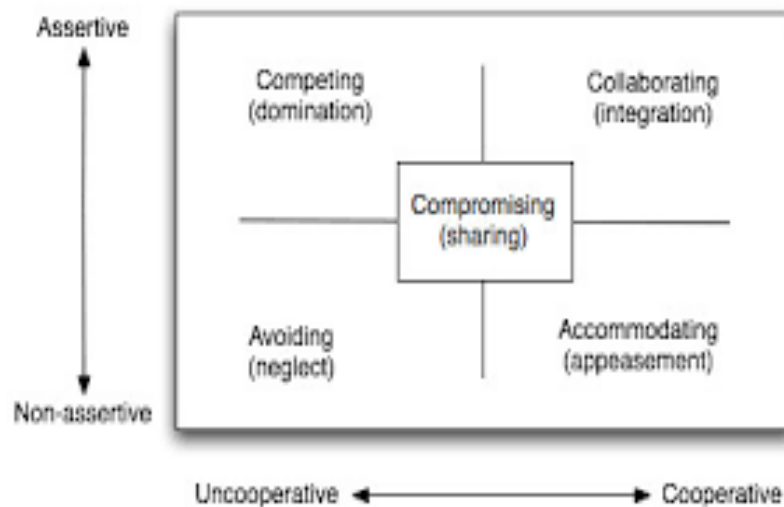

Figure 1: Conflict resolution approaches
Source: The taxonomy of conflict handling modes
(adapted from Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

The Thomas and Kilmann model was designed to assess peoples' behaviour in conflict handling situations. They described people's behaviour as having two dimensions: first, is assertiveness – labelled on the vertical axis as the extent to which a person desires to satisfy personal concerns during conflict resolution (i.e. assertive – non-assertive); second is cooperativeness (on the horizontal axis) – that is perceived as one's concern for others when settling conflicts (i.e. uncooperative – cooperative). Thomas and Kilman proposed that these two basic dimensions of behaviours define five different modes of responding to conflict handling dispositions, namely competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising. They explained that an individual using a competing style is more concerned about his or her own 'dominating' interest at the expense of others. So this style is described as assertive and uncooperative. The accommodating style is unassertive and cooperative, but opposite to competing. Here, the individual neglects personal interests to 'appease' the others. Avoiding is categorised as unassertive and uncooperative. It is when the individual neither pursues personal concerns nor those of others. Avoiding may not deal with the conflict but might take the form of either diplomatically sidestepping problems or postponing settlement to a later time. Collaborating is recognised as both assertive and cooperative and involves attempts to work with others interactively to find solutions. Finally, compromising is proposed to be moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The aim is to find mutually acceptable solutions and concessions that satisfy both parties.

Instructively, Saeed et al. (2014) suggested that Thomas-Kilmann's model is a useful tool to help leaders understand conflict handling mechanisms. Therefore, this study aims to draw from the model in assessing the effects of leadership style on conflict handling protocols in Nigerian universities. As discussed earlier, the advent of democratic rule in 1999 brought about the liberalisation of the Nigerian higher education sector, leading to a proliferation of universities in the country. Quests for skilled human capital by Nigerian corporate employers, coupled with the high rate of unemployment, corruption, poor management of foreign earnings and another plethora of reverses characterising our political culture, are making most young people and adults struggle to obtain higher learning degrees and certificates for employability. With regards to the cultural composition in the country, there is a convergence among various tribes that best describes Nigeria as a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1980). This is credited to the overall social framework portraying interdependence among various social groups. In Nigeria, there is a sense of integrated cultural cohesion that prioritises the collective rights of families, work groups and community interests above individual achievements. In a sense, this is why parental decisions regarding educational investment in their children are highly prioritised.

Method

Methodologically, the study draws from an interpretive-constructivist tradition (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The rationale for this methodological approach is to give an appropriate framework for the development of an in-depth understanding of a researched phenomenon from "richly detailed narratives of the lived experiences of individuals"

(Cresswell, 2008). We embarked on a qualitative design to probe issues that lie beneath the behaviours and dispositions of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the period 15 March to 30 July 2016 with principal management staff comprising Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, Deans of Faculties and Chief Librarians in two public and three private Nigerian universities, randomly selected. A total of 40 participants consisting of 31 men and 9 women with ages ranging from 46 to 76 years were recruited. All participants were married except one who nominated divorced status. Table 1 shows demographic details.

Table 1: Demographics of study participants

Types and numbers of universities	Management position and numbers interviewed	Marital status	Age (years) of participants
2 public universities (labelled PubU1; PubU2) Offer FD and HD 3 private universities (labelled PrivU1; PrivU2; PrivU3) Offer FD & HD	Vice-Chancellors 1 PubU, 2 PrivU Registrars 2 PubU, 3 PrivU Bursars 1 PubU, 3 PrivU Deans of Faculties 8 PubU, 13 PrivU Chief Librarians 3 PubU, 4 PrivU	Married 39 Divorced 1	46-50: 4 M, 1 F 51-55: 3 M, 1 F 56-60: 3 M, 2 F 61-65: 9 M, 2 F Over 65: 12 M, 3 F
Note: PubU-Public University; PrivU-Private University; M-Male; F-Female; FD-First degree, HD-Higher degree (all 5 universities admit students for both first and higher degrees).			

Participants were solicited through visits to each institution, and formal consent was sought to hold interview sessions. Consent was also obtained from participants after full disclosure of our research purposes. A purposive (also known as judgemental) sampling strategy was used, as this method of non-probabilistic sampling was deemed appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and commenced with the introduction of the research and establishing the importance of the topic to the university community in general. Interviews were audio recorded (with consent from interviewees) using a predetermined but flexible questioning protocol. For example, interview questions asked, "In your own opinion, how would you describe the leadership style that you adopt to get the academics and non-teaching staff to perform as required by your University? As a leader, how do you get academics dedicated and mentally absorbed in effectively performing their teaching and research duties? How do you as a leader deal with disagreements in your department/ faculty/ university?"

All interviews were subsequently transcribed, and for analysis, subjected to a thematic analysis procedure collectively by the researchers. This involved coding (or indexing) the transcripts (i.e. noticing and labelling the concepts found in the transcript relevant to the research topic). After that, codes with similar characteristics (underlying ideas) were identified and appropriately collapsed to form a content area or category. The coding process was done with a high level of open-mindedness and ensuring that the emerging categories from a combination of codes were not prior-imposed. We considered the labelling of final categories that eventually emerged as dominant themes representing the correct and accurate reflections expressed about the impact of their leadership behaviours on employee engagement, and managing conflicts within the context of the study.

Results

Themes emerged revealing a potential congruence existing between leadership practices and culturally nuanced values. Specifically, these themes encompassed the beneficial, challenging and facilitating aspects of Nigerian university leadership styles, their impact on employee engagements and approaches adopted in managing conflicts. The analysis aimed at striking a balance between the *emic* (i.e. the insider perspective of the study participants) and the *etic* (i.e. the researchers' views and interpretations) from material evidence (Van Bekkum, Williams & Morris, 2011). The emerging themes from core areas of this study are discussed as follows.

Leadership ideologies

The responses from participants focused on assessing their leadership competencies and attitudes displayed on a daily basis. Each participant described the leadership style adopted to get academics and non-teaching staff to perform their duties as required. For many, this was a medium to evaluate leadership skills and potentials that meaningfully contributed to work engagement in academia. For instance, participants stated:

> In assessing my leadership style, I demonstrate high-level experience acquired over the years as a senior administrator […] So I energetically display abilities with self-asserting behaviours that heavily relies on policy compliance and an emphatic leadership style that positively influences perceptions of hard work (Registrar, PubU1).

> I use a relational approach in my style of leadership with all members of staff in the university but also do not allow this method to compromise my ability to make final decisions on some crucial matters if I feel that the teamwork approach may slow down the process. I still believe following uniformity in the system is still the best (VC, PrivU2)

The preceding statements indicate the adoption of leadership styles grounded in interdependence and communal interest, to which a leader displays a sense of obligation to influence performance-related outcomes. In this context, a major part of the social fabric of Nigeria is its collectivist culture, where social interests and group collaboration are prioritised, although people are mandated to submit to formal authority and bureaucratic systems. Whilst the traditional values of leadership functions illustrated in interview excerpts show a relational process that creates a leader-member exchange model

of inclusion (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), there is a considerable measure of assertiveness and specific hierarchical system of control that Nigerian leaders hold in their relationship with others. The current findings reveal leaders whose behaviours are characterised by high initiation of the structure as bosses with expertise and experience, as well as maintaining consideration for others. Further interviews revealed that some of these participants in university management also felt the need to possess the ability to influence academics to perform tasks over a period using participatory leadership approaches that inspires and motivates subjects (Adair, 2006). This method was seen to emphasise a subordinate's choice to perform their roles with the opportunity to exchange ideas and encourage discussions.

There were also comments from some participants, especially the professors, that their age, status and many years of university experience are among cultural contingent factors that make them exceptional leaders who provoke admiration and respect from others. This is because the process of socialisation plays a significant role in this context. For example, in a typical traditional setting of Nigeria, younger ones are socialised to respect the elderly and those with superior status because they are perceived as having more wisdom and experience. This cultural arrangement was viewed by Bulley, Osei-Bonsu and Rasag (2017) as leaving "an impression on people about the infallibility and sacrosanctity of the elderly, who are regarded as the leaders of the community". However, a few of the study respondents gave narratives suggesting their managerial style as absolute and authoritative. About 20% of the participants were found to have 'strict' personalities in which structure is first emphasised before relational considerations, and where the decision is made exclusively by the leader who demonstrates total control.

> Most of the lecturers in this Faculty believe that I am a very stern person, but I can confirm it works because some academics, particularly those in the lower cadre, prove to be feeble, and incapable and sometimes even show limited competences necessitating me to be tough sometimes (Dean, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, PrivU3).

Another participant stated:

> I tend to adopt a centralised and tight control system which works for this department because the approach gives me leverage to produce error-free work outcomes (Dean, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, PrivU1).

Furthermore, the Chief Librarian in a public university (PubU1) spoke about how he combined both participatory and authoritative styles in ensuring staff performance.

> As one of the principal management staff, I use the carrot and stick managerial approach in an authoritative manner, especially in dealing with erring staff.

Similarly, another participant who is the head of finances (i.e. Bursar) in one of the private universities shared views of adopting authoritative methods for purposes of ensuring orders are carried out without delays. Two other participants shared views on focusing their leadership strength on supervision, organisation, and execution of compliance

through both rewards and punishments. Examples of this leadership method can be seen in the following excerpts:

> My leadership style promotes compliance from academics to the mission and vision of this institution. […] so I clarify targets in achieving these goals and reward diligent academics by writing letters of commendations to top management about their contributions and most times issue queries to underperforming academics (Dean, Faculty of Engineering, PrivU3).

> What works for me regarding my leadership approach is to motivate and direct all staff of our university by appealing to their self-interest which I do by making people comply uncompromisingly with my instructions since they are aware of the benefits of obeying guidelines and repercussions for deviating from standards (Registrar, PrivU1).

The above findings confirm the predominance of an authoritarian style of leadership in Nigeria. This certainly draws from the "power distance" perceived as the levels of acceptance by less prominent members of institutions and organisations that power is unevenly distributed (Hofstede, 1980). The cultural notion that Nigerian employees are submissive and obedient is a result of the existing high power distance contributing to shaping prevailing authoritarian leadership styles (e.g. Hofstede scored Nigeria 80 on power distance). Most Nigerian leaders are often seen as power and status-driven. It is evident that a transactional leadership style is being adopted as exemplified in some of the study excerpts. These findings resonate with several studies (e.g. Geyery & Steyrer, 1998; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005) which revealed transactional leaders as people who value structure, order and docility. The effectiveness of this style is premised on a social exchange between the leader and follower, in which the leader champions compliance through the use of punishments and rewards. From the findings, the transactional method is also contingent specific in Nigeria as institutional leaders are clear about their expectations, by setting rewards for those who adhere to instructions and sanctions erring staff. In line with this finding, Daramola and Amos (2016) asserted that the concept of this managerial style in university governance is for purposes of centralising leadership powers to attain efficiency in decision-making.

Contrastingly, three of the female participants shared views of how hierarchical advancement in their university career as senior academics and administrators made them aggressively flaunt their leadership skills by appealing to higher ideals and values of subordinates, to the surprise and admiration of everyone, despite being women. Two of the women spoke specifically about how they seek to overcome gender stereotypes by relentlessly adopting a relationship-based approach that incorporates motivational and inspirational practices to influence the performance of followers (Bass, 1985).

> As an experienced Professor of English and Linguistics, I inspire both lecturers and administrative staff in my Faculty to achieve remarkable results by giving them some level of autonomy in decision making that sometimes makes some of the male lecturers surprised at the level of my motivational drive to make people creative and innovative (Dean, Faculty of Humanities, PrivU2).

Interestingly, another female participant who is the head of library services (PubU2) commented on how she breaks the gender glass ceiling by displaying traits typically associated with masculinity such as aggressiveness, dominance and competitiveness in enhancing her leadership style. She claimed her style draws on mentoring and empowering the academic community on the use of library services.

> My leadership style draws on stimulating learning and development of both staff and students on the use of the library. Sometimes I aggressively generate awareness and elevate the interests of my members of staff in achieving this aim. Men that are part of my crew are sometimes intrigued by how passionate and zealous I can become just like them (Head of Library Services, PubU2).

The above statements represent feminist accounts of how they demonstrate leadership abilities. Their remarks imply efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes by showcasing behaviours typically ascribed to man and masculinity (Johnson et al., 2008). Here, masculine demeanours such as determination, courage, assertiveness, competitiveness and strength are implicitly highlighted. This is because Nigeria is traditionally patriarchal and leadership is associated with masculinity in the workplace (Chukwu & Eluko, 2013). Eboiyehi, Fayomi and Ebioyehi (2016) found that women (about 29.2%) are under-represented in academia when compared to men (70.8%). However, our findings confirm the general notion that women may be more inclined to exhibit a transformational style because of their innate characteristics of care, support, affection and intuition (Morgan, 2004). For instance, Kent, Blair and Rudd (2010) established that women appear to adopt participative leadership styles and are more often transformational leaders than men, who commonly adopt directive and transactional approaches. Also, research reveals a positive relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement (Cenkci & Özçelik, 2015; Eldor, 2016; Fearon, McLaughlin & Morris, 2013).

Influence on engagement

Participants also revealed the extent to which their leadership styles had multiple effects on work engagement. For instance, a few claimed to adopt authoritative leadership styles by using strict control over subordinates and at the same time demanding unquestionable obedience.

> When it comes to getting academics fully engaged with their day-to-day teaching and research demands, I authoritatively ensure that academics develop a work-related state of mind characterised by high levels of energy, mental resilience and putting in extra hours if the need arises (Dean of Social and Management Science Faculty, PrivU1).

Another participant remarked that:

> Despite my dogmatic approach combined with exercising strong discipline and control tactics as a leader to get our lecturers and administrative workers to do their jobs diligently and in conformity with the required standards of our institution, I also behave as a father will do to his children by advising people to always use their initiatives and get cognitively involved in their daily affairs. (Dean, Faculty of Law, PrivU2).

The above remarks confirm significant links between leadership style and work engagement similar to findings in other extant literature (e.g. Suharti & Suliyanto, 2012). However, the responses from participants also suggest the use of an authoritarian style in engaging employees. This approach suggests that lecturers and non-academics are made to draw from their resources such as self-resilience, diligence, hard work and other cognitive attributes to satisfy these types of leaders. These findings support studies such as Wang et al., (2013) who revealed that an authoritarian leadership approach tends to affect some employee outcomes, such as using cognitive drive and self-energy on the task performed, and compliance with a supervisor's directives. However, a handful of participants narrated how they exerted benevolence to interact with subordinates as well as being receptive to their feedback. Such leadership expressions of care and support for subordinates were held to have a positive relationship with employee engagement.

> Since I am the oldest professor age-wise in this Faculty comprising six other professors, four senior lecturers, five lecturers and three assistant lecturers under my care, I tend to get everyone involved in our decisions especially during our monthly Faculty meetings. We collectively agree on activities that can move our Faculty forward. I also allow them to express their views on how they can develop higher levels of engagement at work. As such, we all work as a family (Dean, Faculty of Engineering, PubU1).

This view portrayed a positive relationship between a benevolent leadership style and subordinates' work engagement. Moreover, the extant literature (e.g. Cenkei & Ozcelik, 2015) found leaders with benevolent attributes increased subjects' compliance with leadership demands. Additionally, one of the participants indicated that leadership style has an impact on worker's job satisfaction and institutional commitment. Specifically, one Vice-Chancellor (i.e. VC, PrivU1) mentioned how he benevolently uses intrinsic motivators, and to a lesser extent extrinsic motivators, to stimulate a higher level of intellectual engagement from lecturers. Intrinsic motivators such as autonomy and opportunities to learn are job resources that were said to be predictors of work engagement. Observations similar to those by VC PrivU1 were made by another participant (i.e. Bursar, PubU2) who asserted that more empowering behaviours by a leader towards subordinates propels higher physical, emotional and cognitive levels of engagement. Furthermore, a few responses from some participants demonstrated how work engagement is enhanced by a series gratifications designed to maximise role performance, although one interviewees believed acceptable work engagement is achieved when a leader earns respect by following normative regulations, strict discipline and systematic control of employee outcomes.

Conflict handling

The final set of interview questions focused on assessing how leadership styles impact conflict management practices so that work engagement is not compromised. One of the participants whose leadership behaviour is transformational expressed convictions about how he strives to minimise disruptions in the workplace.

> I will not deny the fact that disagreements can arise, especially amongst we academics but one salient way I resolve some of these conflicts by the special grace of God, is to always

> advise or even instruct my members of staff to always adapt to institutional changes at all given circumstances and try to stay away from verbal and actual aggression that can jeopardise their careers (Dean, Faculty of Environmental Science, PubU1).

According to another participant who claimed to display an intrinsically-based transformational style of leading asserted that while interpersonal conflicts are bound to arise in social interactions, such conflicts should be managed constructively. In doing this, the participant held that:

> In resolving conflicts, particularly in higher institutions of learning, I believe leaders in whatsoever capability in the university should avoid expecting too much from their subordinates, but rather they should sit together with these employees and jointly set the targets or goals as well as checkpoints that will not escalate conflicts to damaging proportions. I sometimes pray for God's help to manage conflicts wisely (Dean, Faculty of Education, PubU2)

The above excerpts confirmed general ideas that people from collectivist cultures are more likely to use non-confrontational methods such as accommodating and collaborating techniques to manage conflicts. Consistent with this argument, some authors (e.g. Elsayed & Buda, 1996, Doucet et al., 2009) have reported a preference for this kind of style on the part of collectivists. Arguably, other subtle conflict management styles identified with these societies include conflict avoidance, making compromises, and negotiations. Culturally, beliefs in deities, divine providence and spirituality (e.g. making prayers) also influence decisions of Nigerians when confronted with difficult situations, as evidenced in the excerpt above. Emerging knowledge from these findings is ties between conflict management and leadership constructs. From the study, it is presumed that leaders exhibiting a transformational leadership style appeared inclined to a conflict-handling style of accommodating complaints and making concessions to harmonise competing claims. However, some participants held the view that a transactional leadership style made them rely on hierarchical dictates from management, on how internal conflicts should be resolved. Evidence showed that these leaders operate from a position of power and rank. For instance, the Registrar (PrivU2) explained that once institutional disagreements are brought to his attention, what he does is to employ a competitive style in diffusing the conflict by making decisions to resolve such issues without questioning parties. He acknowledged that this conflict handling procedure might cause a win-lose situation between parties in some cases, and the reason given was that:

> From my experience, conflict is part of life, and you may find it very difficult to please everyone when resolving various levels of conflicts (Registrar, PrivU2).

In particular, one participant narrated how his mode of leadership style is channelled towards getting people to see the reasons why work should not be compromised, even in the face of grudges and disagreements. Additionally, one of the Deans interviewed said he used an authoritative leadership style, aiming to settle disputes in a dominating fashion. He claimed to be extraordinarily self-assertive and preferred managing people in a rational way for an economic purpose.

Discussion

This study provides insights into our understanding of leadership styles of senior management staff in Nigerian universities. The study further unveiled common perceptions of how leadership styles influences work engagement and conflict handling. Based on the findings, the following significant contributions were made. First, evidence from the case study revealed the extent to which cultural values are determinants of leadership practices. Although the style of leadership towards subordinates found here correspond to well-established behavioural dimensions of many types of leadership styles described in the literature, such as authoritarian, participatory, charismatic, transactional and transformational styles. However, the results also depict culture as one of the leading forces influencing the nature of managerial styles adopted in Nigerian universities. These findings are consistent with the views of the GLOBE study where it emerged that leadership practices are contextual, that is, they are embedded in societal traditions and could vary according to cultural inclinations (House et al., 2004). Some of the leadership styles expressed in the study mirrored the Nigerian culture ingrained in interdependence, collectivism and hierarchical recognition.

For instance, narratives from this study showed leadership styles premised on exerting leadership skills to stimulate in-group performance and inviting inputs from subordinates on decisions in a relational fashion. However, leadership practices in this context also rely heavily on procedures, policies, and regulations, as well as some specific hierarchical systems. As such, leaders follow the rules rigorously and ensure compliance. Although this system of leadership may provide structure and uniformity in performance outputs, one of its drawbacks is that it may hinder organisations that rely on flexibility, innovation and creativity. This leadership practice is like the Nigerian society characteristic of high power distance, where subordinates are expected to accept the uneven distribution and hierarchical order of power. In managing organisations in an African context, Zoogah and Beugre (2012) asserted that a leader is perceived as feeble and incapable if such a person often solicits advice and opinions from subordinates. Bulley, Osei-Bonsu and Rasaq (2017) further confirmed that a leader worthy of respect in this context is always seen as 'a superior father figure and makes all important decisions' while projecting themselves as having a more considerable control over those being led. This is one of the possible reasons why some of the participants identified as using centralised and tightly controlled leadership styles which resemble an autocratic approach. Akor (2014) argued that these leadership instincts are popular among Nigerian organisation managers who are task-oriented and as a result are more interested in organising and defining relationships between themselves as leaders and their subordinates. Additionally, the transactional method used by some university leaders in this research also establishes preferences for creating structures that make it abundantly clear what is expected of subjects and the consequences (either rewards or punishments). In essence, the focus of this style is for university leaders to closely monitor the output of workers and ensure that prescribed paths are followed.

The second contribution of this study is that it reveals leadership structures in Nigeria as patriarchal. Studies such as those by Ogbogu (2011) and Olaogun, Adebayo and Oluyemo (2014) have identified the issue of gender inequality in academia and struggles of female academics in the Nigerian university system arising from the male-dominated mode of governance in Nigerian tertiary institutions. In the current study, data collected shows that men out-numbered women in the five universities. The study indicates that women are inclined to adopt a transformational leadership style. Eagly and Johnson (1990) contended that gender stereotypic expectation is hypothetically a reason for women to exhibit an interpersonally oriented style that places value on communication, collaboration and participation, in contrast to the masculine mode of management characterised by a task-oriented style.

The third main contribution of this study is showing how context shapes the impact of leadership styles on immediate subordinates' effectiveness (i.e. engagement). Findings revealed preferences for authoritative practices similar to an autocratic style by some participants, given the nature of the Nigerian culture that thrives on patriarchy, control and domination. This approach to leadership is said to generally result in passive resistance and requires continuous pressure and direction from leaders in order to get employees engaged. However, the existence of social relationship systems as a prominent cultural value in Nigeria is evident in the paternalistic leadership style adopted by some participants, for purposes of making employees acknowledge that authority figures best know how every decision will affect work engagement. The final contribution of this study is about perceptions of leadership approaches impacting upon conflict handling. The study revealed that participants who exhibit transactional and transformational leadership styles had preferences for accommodating, collaborating and avoiding strategies, popularly identified with collectivist cultures (Doucet et al., 2009). This view is consistent with previous findings that have found collectivists to engage in non-combative conflict handling practices for purposes of maintaining harmony and sustaining strongly knitted social relations (Friedman, Chi & Liu, 2006). This contrasts with conflict resolution in individualistic cultures, where studies provide a picture showing an intense use of assertive and active tactics in conflict situations, with more significant concern for attaining social justice. For instance, personal goals and individual preferences are prioritised in individualistic nations such as the United States and the UK. Therefore, differences in cultural values have been proposed as one reason for differences in behavioural styles in conflict handling.

Conclusions and research implications

The findings of the study have important theoretical, practical and policy implications. From the theoretical perspective, the study supports the fact that national culture is a contingent factor influencing the choice of leadership style. Thus, the study suggests more theoretical advancement that takes into cognisance country-specific cultural variables shaping leadership practices. On the practical level, it is clear that cultural dynamics defines leadership behaviours in Nigerian universities. Inferences can be made from the study on the dominance of some cultural practices and traditions such as patriarchy,

authoritative leadership tendencies and inclinations towards high power distance. This can potentially undermine leadership effectiveness in Nigerian institutions of learning if power is arrogated in extreme measures. This why Ukpia and Ereh (2016) argued that poor management style of Nigerian universities emerges from our lack of higher forms of culture and ethical conduct that can stir institutional leadership on paths of academic excellence, through a university system that will sustain development and salutary values in our society. It is suggested that Nigerian university management should appropriately incorporate cultural values in conjunction with leadership styles that promote environments fostering positive work engagement, as well as always reaching a win-win situation in conflict resolution. Leadership development practices capable of fostering a favorable emotional climate in Nigerian institutions should be prioritised. As a matter of policy, regulatory and supervisory structures should be put in place to formalise conflict intervention frameworks that initiate problem-solving negotiations.

Additionally, leaders should allocate resources to training and development on how skills-sets for leadership success in Nigeria universities can thrive. One limitation of the present study is that the sample was limited to senior staff in university leadership roles. Future research that will include perceptions from junior staff about leadership styles may provide exciting findings in a broader scope. Furthermore, conducting a quantitative study on the same topic makes findings more widely generalisable, as survey studies can involve larger sample sizes. It will also be interesting to examine similar topics in universities in other African countries.

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