Thriving Social Networks within African Work Organizations: The Role of Leadership

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Abstract

The presence and growth of social networks within African work organizations is a phenomenon which given its implications on the survival and effectiveness of the organization, calls for a more in-depth review and investigation. This study reviews literature on the prevalence and nature of this social phenomenon especially given groupings such as religion and ethnicity within the African work organization. The study therefore investigates through a review of extant literature, the relationship between leadership and thriving social networks within African organizations. The review of literature provides an in-depth assessment of the nature leadership and its role as an antecedent in fostering workers engagement and involvement with various forms of social networks and the implications of such groups for the overall functioning of the organization. The literature revealed support for a substantial level of association between the variables with outcomes of social networks and group participation by workers, tied significantly to leadership styles and activities.

Keywords: Leadership, social networks, religion, ethnicity

1. Introduction

Over the years, the study of groups at workplace has emerged as an increasingly important part of the organizational behavior and management literature. This is more so, since it is an accepted fact that group affiliation is part of most employee's work life. More importantly, it is also believed that groups can restrict or enhance the accomplishment of organizational goals. African studies in organization behavior (**OB**) have hitherto focused on the functioning of formal groups to the neglect of informal groups (Appelbaum *et al* 2004; Ejiofor, 1981; Ahiauzu, 1983). This situation has tended to create a gap within the process of effective management of Institutions of Higher Learning. This situation shows that full scale knowledge on the effectiveness of Institutions of Higher Learning is at present inadequate.

We accept that the African society is said to have a collectivist system where the informal group is likely to exert a lot of influence of her institutions which include the Institutions of Higher Learnings. Yilmaz (2009) has succinctly expressed this in his analysis of the African society when he noted that the African society is a system of mutually benefiting reciprocities. Society to the African exists for the good of its members in a system of role reinforcement. This involves myriad reciprocal relationship. The African communalistic traditions provide a peculiar moral context to order their complex system of reciprocities in contrast to the British-American type. The inter play between the moral element and the principle of reciprocal relationship is critical in distinguishing what is African. The foregoing explanations reveals that, in individualistic societies tasks are seen as having priority over relationship whether formal or informal relationship. In a collectivistic society however, relationship is seen as having priority over task. Thinking along the same line Naami (2005) noted that, one fact which stands out loud and clear concerning the traditional African society, is its multiple nature whereby people are constantly engaged in face-to-face social relations wherein they play many roles. This implies that, as the author further observed, a person may at one time be for the same people a teacher, a preacher, a judge, a medicine man as well as a father (Naami, 2005). The author concluded by arguing that economic analysis alone cannot explain the interaction of these role because they do not operate in isolation one from another (Naami, 2005). This study therefore, offers a theoretical discourse on the relationship between leadership and the growth of social networks within African work organizations. The significance of this paper is hinged on the paucity of literature which addresses the extent to which leadership contributes to the growth and prevalence of social networks within African organizations, especially with regards to the Nigerian workplace

2. Leadership

Leadership is so pervasive and important to the effective functioning of organizations that it is obviously essential to understand what factors determine its effectiveness. It involves the exercise of influence on the part of the leader over the behavior of one or more people. To exercise such influence, the leader must have at his or disposal any combination of these different sources of power. These sources include the following: reward

power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power as well as referent power. Ashour (1982) pointed out that leadership effectiveness depends not only upon the leadership's power, but also upon what the leader uses his or her influence to encourage subordinates to do. The need for leadership in an organization cannot be over-emphasized. This is because leaders are needed to structure the tasks, decide on who should do what, and delegate assignments. Leaders also inspire and motivate other members of the organization and transform them into committed contributors to the organization. As an organizational process, it can be studied on three different levels namely, the individual, the group and the organization. At the individual level focus is on the trait of successful leader. On the group level, focus is on leadership behavior of both formal and informal leader. On the organizational level, focus is on how organizational effectiveness is determined by the interaction between the leader, the follower and the situation. I would rather concern myself with the third level i.e. organization level, and examine the possibility or otherwise, of applying the same process of leadership in all organizations.

There are four contingency theories of leadership that have received primary attention. These are Hersey and Blanchard's situation leadership, House's path-goal theory of leadership and Vroom and Yetton's normative decision-making model of leadership. For the purpose of this work, we are limiting Durselves to Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model, Fielder's contingency and House's path-goal theory. Focus of Hersey and Blanchard model is on the relationship between the leaders and the followers. The model combined three variables namely the amount of guidance and direction task behavior, a leader gives, the amount of emotional support — relationship behavior, a labour provides and the readiness level maturity that followers exhibit in performing a specific task of function. The maturity of the follower is seen as the most important situational variable influencing leader behavior. This maturity varies along a continuum and is determined by two components namely ability and willingness. Ability refers to the follower's knowledge and skill whereas willingness is a function of the follower's commitment and confidence. According to this model, effective leadership requires that the leader's task behavior and relationship behavior must change to match the maturity of the group.

Rather than changing the leader to fit the situation, he recommended changing the situation to fit the leader through what he called job engineering (Fielder, 1965). Job engineering involved changing one of the situational factors to increase or decrease the favourability of the situation. Theories tend to change frequently, being highly responsive to the research evidence and Fielder's contingency theory is not an exception. It's shortcoming notwithstanding, the theory had set forth guidelines for such personal actions as transform rotation, selection, training, job modification and the like. Another situational leadership theory is the Path-goal developed by House (1974), and Evans (1970). This theory is to a large extent an expansion of expectancy theory concept into the leadership domain. The model explains how leaders can facilitate task performance by showing subordinate how their performance can be instrumental in achieving desired rewards. This basic idea of the theory can be broken into simple segments namely providing subordinate with rewards, making the attainment of those rewards contingent upon the accomplishment of performance goals and helping subordinates obtain, rewards by clarifying the paths to the goals, that is, helping subordinates understand exactly what they must do to obtain rewards and making these Paths easier to travel (i.e. providing subordinates with coaching, direction, and assisting when needed) (Podsadoff, 1982). The theory went on to explain that for these tasks to be accomplished the leader has to engage in different types of leadership behavior, depending upon the nature and demands of the particular situation.

Based on the foregoing explanation, four distinct leadership styles were outlined and these are directive leadership, supportive leadership, achievement-oriented leadership and participative leadership. These four styles can be performed by the same manager at different times and different situations. Also, three environmental factors were identified which moderate the effects of the leadership styles. These factors are, the nature of the tasks, the formal authority system with the organization as well as the group norms and dynamics. Certain characteristics are also expected from subordinates who influence the extent to which they will see the leader's behavior as acceptable and satisfying. The characteristics are ability, locus on control, as well as needs and motives. Although this theory seem to have predicted well how the situational variables and leaders style combine to influence individual satisfaction and group morale; it has not shown, on the other hand, to be a good predictor of individual or group performance. The theory has also been of understanding the complexity of the situation. These, three situational theories on leadership have certain things in common. They are considered three common factors namely the task to be performed, the leader's behavior or relationship with subordinates and the situation. They just differ in their treatment of these factors. For instance, Fielder in his theory believed that leadership style is resistant to change, whereas path-goal theory suggested that leaders can change their style to suit the preventing situation. Hersey and Blanchard believed that the task-behaviour and relationship behavior of the leader can change to match the maturity of the subordinates. But, whatever leadership styles an organization adopts needs to be communicated to the members of that organization. Any idea or philosophy that is not communication process is so important for the effective working of any organization.

3. Social Networks Within African Work Organizations

Kidder (2012) explained that work organizations can be conceptualized in terms of the concept of social paradigm. A social paradigm is a way of doing things, that is, a way of look at the world. Kuhn (1970) explained that social paradigm refers to shared understanding of standard practice and exemplars that emerge in scientific disciplines to guide research and instructions in work organizations. Thompson (2001) maintained that the development of shared social paradigms is what occurs in work organizations. There are some implications of the view of work organizations as social paradigms. For instance, organizational social paradigm once in place, tend to turn work organizations into a closed system. As a closed system, it has its myths and beliefs that infuses day to day activities with meaning and purpose. Social paradigms therefore are the glue binding work organizations together as well as an element differentiating a particular work organization from its environment and other work organizations.

Fielder (1974) claimed in his model that group performance depends on the interaction of the leader's style and the favourableness of the situation. His contributions consist of identifying the following, leadership orientation of the leaders and three situational factors influencing leadership (Fielder and Martin, 1974). A leader could be either task-oriented or relations-oriented. The favourableness of a situation is determined by three variables which are leader-member relations, task-structure and power-position variables. The situations run on a continuum of extremely favourable to extremely unfavourable. An extremely favourable situation consists of good leader-member relations, a highly structured task, and a strong power positions. On the other hands, an extremely unfavourable situation exist when the leader-member relation is poor, the task unstructured and the leader possess a weak power position. Fielder opposed the idea of changing relationship orientation and argued that basic leadership orientation or an individual is relatively stable characteristic that cannot be easily changed

Similarly, in an attempt to further understand the meaning of work organization, writers on organizations have applied different ideological methods in their study (Yaghoubi *et al* 2010; and Kahn, 1978; Bandura 1977). Some of the known ideological methods are rationality in what is being studied, population ecology, and resource dependence. Adopting the rationality perspective, the study of an organization much like economics can be split into micro and macro parts. The micro perspectives of viewing work organizations, just as an individual assesses their peculiarities in terms of their age, size ownership and the type of their products. The macro perspective study work organizations in relations to their environment. In this instance, researchers tend to concentrate on the factors influencing the environment of work organization and vice-versa. It is well known that work organizations operate within other systems such as economic, political and ecological systems (Castro *et al* 2004, Child 1974; Salancik and Pfeffer 1977a). All these systems influence the performance of work organizations. Arguing that there are different ways of studying work organizations, Cumming (1981) described the field of work organizations in terms of topic heading such as task designs, feedback, structure, technology and control. Others, such as Mitchell (1979) used headings such as job attitudes, motivations and leadership to describe the field of organization. The earlier writers, thought influenced by their different backgrounds looked at actions generally in work organizations and described actions in work organizations as being rational with elements of conscious, foresightful action, reasonably and autonomously constructed to achieve some goal or value (Hickson *et al* 1971; Kast and Rosenzweig 1982). Examples of such rational action include expectancy theory which looks much like a model of the maximization of subjective expected utility in decision theory (Edwards 1962).

Goal setting theory (Laschinger, 2004), argues that people's behavior is governed by the goals they are seeking to attain. Pfeffer (1981) observed that from the perspective of rational action, work organizations act intentionally and rationally to achieve some goals, such as efficiency or high performance. Thinking along the same line, William (1975) believed that rational action is exhibited in work organization's structural contingency theory, the market failure approach as well as Marxist approaches to work organizations, which presume delightful and intentional actions. From this perspective, behavior in the work organization is seen as being determined by and presumably reflective of conscious and purposive action. Action is therefore undertaken to obtain some goals or sets of goals. Although work organizations can intentionally and rationally choose a line of action and behavior, situations can impose a line of action on work organizations. Bowers (1973) a psychologist referred to this as situationism. This perspective does not see action as the result of conscious, foresightful choice but as the result of external constraints, demands and forces that the social actor may have little control over or even cognizance of (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Lemons, 2010; Amah & Kpakol, 2015). In this case, the behavior of the actor taking the action may have little or nothing to do with his values or preference. The actor's behavior reflects the constraints of external elements. Actions or behavior is explained within the context of the variables in work organization's environment. It is therefore not surprising to find Hannan and Freeman (1977) argue that because of the situational constraints, work organizational forms or structures are not taken in terms of the choices made by managers to enhance efficiency and performance, but this is done in terms of the inevitable, selection-induced it that emerge between the environment niches and forms that can survive in those niches. In a similar fashion (Harwarth and Lery (2007) explained that the ideal of operant conditioning seeks to account for

the behaviour of individuals not in terms their cognition, goals or needs to but in terms of the reinforcing properties of the environment. This perspective tend to focus attention on factors within and outside the environment, rather than in the entity taking the action, as the most productive means of understanding the performance of work organizations.

There is yet another perspective — the emergent process view on action, which fundamentally denies either internally, directed or externally determined rationality of behavior of work organizations. Some aspects of this perspective, the decision process theories (March and Simon, 1976), stress the sequence of unfolding the nature of activity in the performance of work organizations. Organ (1998) argued that because — participation in work organizational decision is both segmented and discontinuous, because preferences develop and change over time, and because the interpretation of the results of action is often problematic, behavior cannot be predicted a priority either by the intention of individual actors or by the conditions of the environment. According to him, work organizations are viewed as context in which people, problems and solutions come together, with the results determined importantly by the process and constraints on that process (Pfeffer 1981). This is because rationality, goals and preferences are viewed as emerging from the actions rather than guiding action. This perspective emphasizes the socially constructed nature of work organizational realities.

Following this perspective, Tavakoli (2007) described work organizations as system of shared meaning in which much of the organizational work consists of symbol manipulation and the development of shared work organizational paradigms. Action is therefore governed by the systems of meaning that emerge and develop within work organizations, and through the development of shared perspectives and negotiated order, stability and cohesion by those within the system. As we have earlier pointed out, one can adopt any perspective in the study of work organizations, be it at the micro or macro level. There is an argument concerning the extent to which work organizational outcomes are the results of planned, intendedly rational actions (Pfeffer 1981; Porter and Lawler 968). The attention here is on the system of environmental constraints and conditions, to enable the explanation and prediction on the performance of work organizations. This means that explanation for action is to be sought in the conditions of the social environment. To do this, we shall be examining the concepts of population ecology and resources dependence. These two perspectives according to Freeman (1982) are not in conflict, rather they are complementary. This is because resource dependence is being encapsulated in the population ecology framework, thereby providing the mechanisms, and local decision making and politics through which the population dynamics occur.

Ecology has to do with the study of the living things especially how they relate and react to their environments. Hannan and Freeman (1977) explained that population ecology argues that change is population of work organizations occur, in part, because of the operations of selection process working on those organizations. Work organizations, while trying to adapt to their environments are faced with both internal and external constraints. Since adaptation process is so constrained, selection processes are how important mechanism through which the characteristics of populations of work organizations evolve over time. This focus on the variety and evolution of work organizational forms constitute the core subject matter for the ecological perspective. Hannan and Freeman (1977) suggested that population ecology of work organizations must seek to understand the distribution of work organizations across environmental conditions and the limitations on work organizational structure in different environments. They went on to explain that work organizational forms are blueprints for work organizational actions and for transferring inputs to outputs.

Wat and Shaffer (2007) defined work organizational form as specific configuration of goals, boundaries and activities. Forms have also been defined with respect to the particular subject populations being investigated and has tended to focus on structural attributes of work organizations. Hannan and Freeman (1977) defined niche as that area in constraint space in which the population out-competes all other local populations. The niche according to them, consists of all those combinations of resources levels at which the population can survive and reproduce itself. Aldrich (1979) defined environmental niches as distinct combinations of resources and other constraints that are sufficient to support an organization form. From the foregoing, we find that work organizations through the selection process adopt a form-generalist or specialist's forms, and found a niche in the environment for its operation (Gabriel & Kpakol, 2014). Campbell (1969) developed a natural selection model that has three stages namely variation, selection and retention. Although, Freeman (1981) saw these stages as occurring simultaneously, Aldrich and Pfeffer (1976) described the process as occurring in stages. Although earlier literature on management assumed that changes and innovation in work organizations are planned activities consciously directed, Aldrich (1979) argued that population ecology model is indifferent to this idea. Variation whether planned or unplanned is the sources from which selection can be made. There are two types of variations: Variations among work organizations, such as organic and mechanistic organization as in variations in managerial practices. According to Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) variations within work organizations can arise as a consequences of failures of work organizational control in the sense that the reason why practices and structures may very within a single work organizations in the incomplete diffusion and incorporation of the work organization's policies and practices in all parts of work organizations. On the other hand, variation within work

organization can be planned. Weick (1976) pointed out that it is more likely to have more local variations in work organizations that are loosely coupled. It has been also argued that loosely coupled work organizations are more likely to have more variations of both planned and unplanned types. This means that there is a greater chance that a form that fits the environment will emerge somewhere in works organizations.

It is often difficult to draw the boundaries between groups, as marginal persons may interact with members of two or more groups. Homan (1970) defined a group "as a number of persons, or members, each of whom, while the group is meeting interacts with every other, or is able to do so, or can at least take personal cognizance of every other". Sheriff and Sheriff (1972) observed that a group is a social unit consisting of a number of individuals who stand in status and role relationship to one another that are stabilized in some degree at a given time and who possess a set of values or norms regulating their behavior, at least in matters of consequence to the group. Accordingly, the essentials in the process of group formation are the following: (1) A motivational base conductive to repeated interaction (2) formation of an organization (structure) consisting of rules and statuses; (3) Formation of rules, traditions, values, or norms; and (4) Differential effects of the group properties on the attitude and behavior of participants over time.

4. Conclusion

In this study, leadership and its relationship with social institutional networks within African work organizations was examined. Literature reveals that there exist substantial levels of association between the constructs (Emego, 2003, Lipsey and Folan, 2007). This is as social networks no doubt have taken various forms of emergency but this study concerned itself with ethnic and religious grouping which according to Gina (2010) are the two major informal relational networks in indigenous African organization which in this circumstance are the higher tertiary educational institution investigated. The discourse revealed that social institutional networks in the forms of ethnic and religious grouping instigate are highly significant among group members whose actions can be considered as goal directed.

A summary of the views of a host of researchers on the concept revealed that an examination of the different usages of the term "group" suggests that each combines a greater or lesser number of the following distinguishing criteria: two or more persons who (1) Have one of more characteristics in common (2) perceive themselves as forming a distinguishable entity (3) are aware of the interdependence of some of their goals or interests, and (4) interact with the another in pursuit of their interdependent goals. In addition, some writers, particularly those with sociological backgrounds, indicate that (5) groups endure over a period of time and as a result develop (6) a set of social norms that regulate and guide member interaction and (7) a set of roles each of which has specific activities, obligations, and rights and associated with it (Hare 1962; McGrath and Altman 1966b).

In our explanation of what consists a group, we lean strongly on the first four of the foregoing distinguishing criteria. It is our belief that this usage is consonant with the intuitive notion that a group is an entity that consists of interacting people who are aware of being psychologically bound together in terms of mutually linked interests. We therefore accept Deutsch (1972) conclusions that a group is to be distinguished from an aggregate, class, category, or type, which consist of people who are classified together because of some common, characteristics. Also "group" implies a psychological or perceived bond, not merely an objective linkage, between the members' interests or goals. Moreover, the psychological linkage has some cohesive feature to it that is, members of a group see that in some respect they sink or swim together. This latter statement is not meant to deny that divisive and disruptive tendencies may exist within a group, rather, it is meant to indicate that by definition a group does not exist if its cohesive bonds are not strong enough to contain its disunifying influences.

Nowadays, tertiary institutions in Nigeria face similar competition challenges like other service-oriented institutions like banks, telecommunication, education, insurance, etc., in areas of customer demanding for high quality services at competitive prices and delivered with courtesy and conscientiousness. Universities are people-centred, where emphases are on customer-oriented marketing (Chao-Chan, 2011). Hence, the knowledge service market favours the buyer, rather than the seller (Lee, Chen, Chen and Chen, 2010). With the growing competition and increasingly complex business environment there is reduction in the ability to understand and anticipate the environmental requirements of organizations and as a result, organizations can not precisely formulate their staff expectations to work, because the outstanding performance is not due to the common efforts of the staff, therefore, organizations need employees with a desire to move beyond formal job expectations (Morrison, 1994 as cited in Sahafi, et al, 2013).

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