THE EFFECTS OF LEADERSHIP ON MEMBERS: THE CASE OF PUBLIC SECTOR TRADE UNIONS IN ZIMBABWE

SIFISO NDLOVU: *PART–TIME LECTURER*: ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Corresponding: ****xyz@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper presents perceptions of trade union members towards their union leaders. The paper is a culmination of a qualitative enquiry where participants were asked some questions through interviews regarding their views about the quality of leadership within their unions. Trade union leadership and followership are complimentary and symbiotic. Pragmatic followership serves to engender effective trade union leadership. Union leaders are expected to work with and stand by their members in order to attain union mandates. Union ethos demands that leaders must place the interest and welfare of workers as their most paramount goal and work assiduously towards satisfying them. Union members must consider the antecedents and pedigree of aspirants and ensure that only unionists with track records of tenaciously and selflessly championing the union's cause should be elected as leaders. Through leadership by example, trust, integrity, and candor, union leaders can bring about positive changes to both workers and their union. Finally, the authors called on union leaders to be alive to their responsibilities and demonstrate ethical and servant forms of leadership in order to cope with the challenges of giving vent to the aspirations of their members.

KEYWORDS

Trade unions, leadership, members, public sector, effects.

Introduction

Most modern organizations comprise of two categories of people, those who lead (leaders) and those who follow (followers). The success of any organization is predicated not only on the basis of how well the leaders lead (Blackburn,2010), but also greatly on how well their followers tag along. So much emphasis is placed on the role of a leader, yet leadership alone does not contribute to success. Followers also play a major part. Followership is integral to leadership and vice versa. In a way, leadership to a certain extent is also hinged on the quality and orientation of its followers. Ebbinghams (2022) in reinforcing this said a leader is someone who has followers. The relationship between both parties is symbiotic (Rathee, 2015). Leaders and followers interact to form a dynamic and purposeful relationship, an essential ingredient in today's world. As stressed earlier, leadership is paramount to organizational success and sustainability leading to the great importance attached to the theme of leadership in modern enterprises. Likewise, Straus et al. (2021) averred that leadership is the major driver of organizational change." What a leader does or his actions especially when championing change initiatives demonstrates the presence of effective leadership with great multiplier effects on organizational growth. More than ever, today's organizations need to squarely tackle changes in technological innovation, competitive strategy and internal organizational operations. Leadership is a crucial factor in confronting, addressing and designing actionable solutions to these issues and or changes that can improve organizational performance (Visser 2011).

Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research methodology and interpretivism as its philosophy. The design used was the multi-case design, and the accessible population comprised of all leaders, members and full-time staff from three public sector unions. The sample comprised three participants who were purposively selected using criterion sampling. The study's epistemology was guided by subjectivism and its ontology was guided by constructivism. The study's data generation instruments included the interview guide, open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussions. Document analysis was also used to complement the other methods. Data were generated over a period of eight months from February 2018 to September 2018.

Findings

Effects of leadership on members

The participants concurred that the leadership in their unions profoundly influenced the followers' trust and loyalty. P4 summed the sentiments expressed by the three participants when he said that:

> *You would want to ask yourself again what would be the indicator of trust and loyalty. As a leader, sometimes we fall into a pit where we think members trust us and we take for granted that they do; but then you need to maybe have some empirical evidence to support your view. We say our members trust us in that they have retained their membership, they have continued investing their membership in us but there is a trend that is beginning to manifest itself. I would like to believe that there is a small percentage (although I do not have the figures) that is dissatisfied with the current leadership to the extent that they withdraw their membership. This I have to emphasise, is a very insignificant figure, though we cannot ignore them (P4).*

Preferred kind of leadership

There was consensus from the participants on the type of leadership that they thought would retain or attract members in their organisations. The participants talked of servant leadership, transparent and accountable to the membership. The sentiments by P6 encapsulates sentiments by the three participants:

> Servant leadership is a type of leadership that subjects itself to account to its membership. We are a grass-root based organisation that engages auditors of international repute to audit our accounts and then come up with a report that will be presented to members at our national conference and the same happens at provincial levels. Every four-year cycle, we subject ourselves to elections and this type of democratic leadership will attract members as they will know that if leaders underperform, they can be easily voted out. Summing it up, I would say that a leadership that accounts for its activities and usage of resources to the members can attract and retain membership (P6).

Participation in selection of leaders

The responses from the participants revealed that it was easy for them to participate in the selection of their leaders. The participants stated that in their organisations, all members were afforded the chance to elect their leaders. This was also overtly manifested by the structures of their organisations which promoted maximum participation of members in the selection of their leaders. However, P5 added another dimension to the selection process in his/her union. Much as the selection process was open to all, P5 indicated that his/her organisation had a subtle mechanism of balancing tribes and regions for stability and unity and within their union, his/her words are captured below:

> We vote democratically, but before voting, one must appreciate the historical factors that there are Ndebeles and Shonas. That brings about a natural divide and we are saying people should not even think like that. Our ancestors have set up a trend that I think should not be lost. Where despite the fact that we have an open race where people can vote, but if we are not careful through democracy, we are likely to marginalize certain groups on the basis of regions, because as a region themselves, they cannot pull together enough votes to get whatever posts they want to get. This is why I am saying our founding fathers had a way of dealing with this because instead of having a completely open democracy, there is an undocumented convention that we should balance and no one feels left out (P5).

Describe leaders in your union

> Responses from the participants reveal that the three thought that leaders in their organisations were democratic, transparent, good listeners, accessible and unifiers. This kind of description was to be expected as the three participants were actually describing themselves since they are holders of key leadership positions within their unions.

Confidence of members towards leaders

The participants were in unison in stating that members of their unions had confidence and satisfied with their leaders across the union structure. The major reasons cited for this state of affair being that the leaders were democratically elected by the members; and that the leadership was transparent, accountable and served the interests of the members.

Demonstration of commitment by elected officers

The participants (P4, P5 and P6) as leaders of their unions themselves, did not find it difficult to respond to this item. As expected they reflected on what they were doing themselves to demonstrate commitment to their roles. The most common manifestation of commitment highlighted by the three was the way they were carrying out their specific mandates as leaders. P4 summed the sentiments of the three participants:

> *I want to observe that every leader at whatever level, they have disseminated information on issues that affect our members. They have maintained focus in terms of issues that the union should prioritise and if what happens on media platforms where leadership belongs, if it is anything to go by, there is a constant reminder to issues that have not been resolved and to say please lets' not forget this, let's keep highlighting these issues so that we account for our being put in these positions. We are not simply put to enjoy but to execute specific mandates. The leaders are aware of their mandates and have been pursuing them (P4).*

Manipulation of the electoral process

The three participants stated that it was not easy to manipulate the electoral process in their unions. However, they admitted that the temptation to manipulate processes was always there and that there were clear mechanisms to detect it and nip it in the bud.

Findings

The characterisation of a leadership that promoted positive perceptions included having an open-door policy, abiding by the union constitution at all times, encouraging members to participate in all union activities, leading from the front especially in times of crises. Leaders were expected to be visible at all times. Some leaders were said to be conspicuous by their anonymity during times of industrial action. They hibernated for the duration of the "confrontational period" and only emerged when the dust had settled. Leaders who were described as greedy and used manipulative tendencies to stay in power negatively impacted on members' perceptions. Members did not like leaders who used charismatic tendencies to manipulate, isolate and ostracise their followers in order to remain in power. Such toxic leaders negatively affected members' trust, loyalty and participation in union activities, yet democratic transparent, member-driven, honest and courageous leaders would attract the full trust and loyalty of their members. The management of trade unions and their resources, particularly financial resources, also emerged as an important factor contributing to the levels of trust, loyalty in the leadership. Poor financial management practices breed suspicion and mistrust, which contribute to union disunity.

Conclusion

There was consensus from the participants on the type of leadership that they thought would retain or attract members in their organisations. The three participants talked of servant leadership, transparent and leadership that is accountable to the membership. They also talked of leadership that unites members and rejects marginalization by any form.According to the participants, leaders behave in ways that could affect members' perceptions towards the organisation's activities either positively or negatively. The description of a leadership that promoted positive perceptions included among others; having an open door policy, always abiding by the constitution of the union as well as a leadership that leads from the front, especially during difficult times like strikes and stay-away.On the other hand, those leaders seen as affecting members' attitudes towards the organisation in a negative way, were described as greedy leaders, leaders who wanted to cling on their positions using manipulative tendencies. Participants preferred democratic leaders, transparent leaders and not power hungry and money seekers as well as honest and brave leaders who would articulate their issues even under difficult times.

Recommendations

Public sector unions should strive very hard to promote positive attitudes from the generality of the membership. Trade union members are mature and intelligent adults who have the capacity to scrutinise the behaviours of their leaders and tell whether the leadership is genuinely concerned about the members' issues individually or collectively.

Therefore, public sector trade union leaders should be visible and lead from the front especially during times of industrial action like strikes or demonstrations. They should not lie torpid during times of crises and emerge when the storm has calmed, this irks and demotivates members. Leaders should also be brave, honest and transparent in dealing with the employer to remove any doubts members may have about their sincerity in dealing the employer. Public sector trade union leaders should also make sure that union resources are fairly and transparently distributed across the union strata.

Members abhor greedy leaders and respect leaders of high integrity. Selfish, egomaniacal and manipulative leaders destroy the trust and loyalty of the membership and drive both current and prospective members out of the union.

References

Blackburn, D. (2010). *Trade Union rights in public services.* Unison: International Centre.

Buhlunga S. (2016). *Trade unions and democracy*. Johannesburg: COSATU.

Ebbinghans, B. (2022). *Trade unions changing role: membership erosion organisational reform and social partnership in Europe.* Berlin: Max Planck Society

International Labour Organisation (2010). "Trade union pluralism and proliferation in Ioannou. *Trade Unions in Greece: Developments, Structure and Prospects,*2(3*):234-253*

King, P. (2006). *The function of trade unions*. London: The Dickson College.

Rathee, S.T. (2015).Strategic Planning for trade unions. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*,

6 (4): 112-122.

Strauss, G., Gallagher, D.G. and Fioeto, J. (2011). *Union membership attitudes and participation* California: University of California.

Visser, J. (2011). *Trends in trade union membership.* OECD: Employment Outlook, 7