SUSTAINABLE STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA TODAY

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ABSTRACT

African Universities are facing a crisis that revolves around student governance. In the recent past, there have been reported student unrests in many universities in Africa and closer home, Kenya. The core of the matter is the issue of student leadership which has been highly politicized and lacks credibility. The solution however lies in implementation of leadership structures that are sustainable and unique to the needs of the university in question. The concepts of sustainable leadership remain complex and confusing for many to grasp. It is a challenge for today's institutions of higher learning to define these concepts and to be able to measure them.

This research paper seeks to highlight the concepts and principles of sustainable student leadership in African universities in the 21st Century.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is the ability to endure, it is derived from Latin (tenere: to hold; sus: up). In human beings it is the potential for long–term maintenance of well being, environmentally, economically and socially. This quality is what the Egyptians had in mind when they built the pyramids; they wanted structures that would honor their kings throughout time.

Leadership is a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task (Keith, 2010).

Sustainable educational change and leadership is three dimensional – it has depth, breadth, and length. However, it also has four other principles that act to fill out the full meaning of sustainability and its challenges for leadership in universities in Africa.

The seven principles are interconnected – a meal, not a menu.

Seven Principles of Sustainability therefore include:

- Depth - sustainable leadership matters.
- Length - sustainable leadership lasts.
- Breath - sustainable leadership spreads.
- Justice - sustainable leadership does no harm and actively improves the surrounding environment. Contribution to wellbeing.
- Diversity - sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity.
- Resourcefulness - sustainable leadership develops and does no deplete material and human resources.
- Conservation - sustainable leadership honors and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future.

Sustainable leadership acts urgently, learns from the past and from diversity, is resilient under pressure, waits patiently for results, and does not burn people out. Sustainable leadership is just

and moral leadership that benefits all of us, now and in the future. It's time to put it to work in education as well - Hargreaves and Fink.

Sustainable Leadership **is** a value system. The goal of sustainable leadership (at every level) is to assist in articulating what values are in play, and to move towards more sustainable values.

Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come - Wangari Maathai, Kenya' assistant minister for environment, natural resources, and wildlife, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dec. 2004

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

Sustainable leadership and improvement are more than matters of mere endurance, of making things last. We define sustainable leadership, in line with the environmental field, in the following way.

Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is a shared responsibility, that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. Sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it, and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development.

This definition suggests seven principles of sustainable leadership as illustrated below:

Sustainable leadership creates and preserves sustaining learning.

The first principle of sustainability is to develop something that is itself sustaining. To sustain means to nourish. Sustaining learning is therefore learning that matters, that lasts and that engages students intellectually, socially and emotionally.

It is not achievement results, but the learning behind them that matters most. The prime responsibility of all educational leaders is to sustain learning (Glickman 2002; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003).

Sustainable leadership secures success over time.

Leadership succession is the last challenge of leadership. It is the challenge of letting go, moving on, and planning for one's own obsolescence. Sustainable improvements are not fleeting changes that disappear when their champions have left.

Sustainable leadership is not achieved by charismatic leaders whose shoes are too big to fill. Instead, it spreads beyond individuals in chains of influence that connect the actions of leaders to their predecessors and successors.

Leadership succession events are almost always emotionally charged with feelings of expectation, apprehension, abandonment, loss or relief (Hart 1993). Frequent and repeated successions aggravate these anxieties. Sustainable leadership therefore plans and prepares for succession, not as an afterthought, but from the first day of a leader's appointment. It also regulates the rate and frequency of successions so that a staff does not suffer from the cynicism that is brought on by succession fatigue (Fink & Brayman in press).

Sustainable leadership demands that serious attention be paid to leadership succession. Successful succession is achieved by grooming successors where there is a need for continuity, by keeping successful leaders in schools longer when they are making great strides in promoting learning, by resisting the temptation to search for irreplaceable charismatic heroes to be the saviors of our universities, by requiring all improvement policies and strategies to include succession plans, and by slowing down the rate of repeated successions so that students and management do not cynically decide to 'wait out' all their leaders.

Sustainable leadership sustains the leadership of others.

One way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure it is developed with and shared by others. Leadership succession therefore means more than grooming student leaders' successors. It means distributing leadership throughout the institution's professional community - so it can carry the torch once a successful leadership has gone, and soften the blow of principal succession (Spillane, Halverson and Drummond, 2001).

Sustainable leadership is not just the responsibility of individuals. In a highly complex world, no one leader, institution or nation can control everything without help (Fullan 2001). Sustainable leadership is a distributed necessity and a shared responsibility.

Sustainable leadership addresses issues of social justice.

Sustainable leadership benefits all students and schools - not just a few at the expense of the rest. Sustainable leadership is sensitive to how lighthouse, magnet or charter campuses and their leaders can leave others in the shadows, and how privileged communities can be tempted to skim the cream off the local leadership pool. Sustainable leadership is an interconnected process. It recognizes and takes responsibility for the fact that campuses affect one another in webs of mutual influence (Baker and Foote, in press).

In this respect, sustainability and succession are inextricably tied up with issues of social justice. Sustainable leadership is therefore not only about maintaining improvement in one's own institution. It is about being responsible to the schools and students that one's own actions affect in the wider environment. It is about social justice.

Sustainable leadership develops rather than depletes human and material resources.

Sustainable leadership provides intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best and brightest of the leadership pool; and it provides time and opportunity for leaders to network, learn from and support each other, as well as coach and mentor their successors.

Sustainable leadership is thrifty without being cheap. It carefully husbands its resources in developing the talents of all its educators rather than lavishing rewards on selecting and rotating a few already-proven stars and policies.

Sustainable leadership systems know how to take care of their leaders and how to get leaders to take care of themselves. Student leaders who are 'burned out' by excessive demands and diminishing resources have neither the physical energy nor the emotional capacity to develop professional learning communities (Byrne, 1994). The emotional health of leaders is a scarce environmental resource. Leadership that drains its leaders dry is not leadership that will last. Unless reformers and policy-makers care for leaders' personal and professional selves, they will engineer short-term gains only by mortgaging the entire future of leadership.

Even the most motivated and committed leaders can only sustain themselves for so long.

Sustainable leadership develops environmental diversity and capacity.

Promoters of sustainability cultivate and recreate an environment that has the capacity to stimulate continuous improvement on a broad front. They enable people to adapt to and prosper in their increasingly complex environment by learning from one another's diverse practices (Capra 1997).

Standardization is the enemy of sustainability. Sustainable leadership recognizes and cultivates many kinds of excellence in learning, teaching and leading and provides the networks for these different kinds of excellence to be shared in cross-fertilizing processes of improvement (Giles and Hargreaves, in press; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; Louis and Kruse, 1995). It does not impose standardized templates on everyone.

Sustainable leadership undertakes activist engagement with the environment.

Sustainable leadership endeavors to bring about change that fosters growth and strives to improve if not evolve the institution from its former self. Such leadership aims at moving from standardized reform allowing room for amendments and inculcation of policies that will espouse potential for development and innovativeness.

In essence, such leadership influences the environment that influences it.

LEADERSHIP ICEBERG

Leadership is much like an iceberg – 10% of it is visible, above the surface of the water, but it's what's below, what you can't see and often can't comprehend, that has the greatest impact on your organization.

Leadership: Hundreds of "official" definitions exist for *leadership* – so one must choose the definition that fits *you* as a leader and that fits the needs of your *organization*. As regards this paper, a leader is one who walks the talk and the floor; knows the way, shows the way, goes the way.

"In order to be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of being phony, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need therefore is integrity and high purpose." - Dwight D Eisenhower

The top 10% of the iceberg is represented by the *skills* of the leader including technical skills to actually do the job, human resources skills to work effectively with others, conceptual skills to think abstractly and trust building skills to *inspire* others. What makes up the remaining 90%? It's the leader's ***character***. Thus, leadership is a winning combination of both skills and character.

Character: "Collective qualities or characteristics, especially mental and moral, that distinguish a person; moral strength"

"There is but one rule of conduct for a man – to do the right thing. The cost may be dear in money, in friends, in influence, in labor, in a prolonged and painful sacrifice, but the cost to do right is far more expensive: you pay in the integrity of your [humanity], in your honor, in strength of character; and for a timely gain, you barter the infinite." -Archer G. Jones

There are some compelling questions that university management and the student leadership team should ask such as: how do we discover the leadership balance our institution's needs, how do we discover the leadership competencies important to us? How do we evaluate what makes our culture and what does our culture value? Many institutions of higher learning never talk about these things – they just blindly go through day to day operations without discovering how to run like a well oiled machine. Leadership seems to be something elusive, but with a strong talent acquisition and succession plan, universities and their constituent colleges can nurture successful leaders. A suggested approach to modeling a sound leadership policy is as follows:

- ✓ Define the leadership skills and leadership character essential to success in the institution.
- ✓ Incorporate global best practices into your discussions to widen the possibilities
- ✓ Gain consensus
- ✓ Develop a visual format that encapsulates the essence of leadership in the university - one that everyone can relate to – an iceberg for example
- ✓ Decide how you will fill the leadership pipeline
- ✓ Select candidates based on character
- ✓ Implement a robust interview process to weed out candidates with the skills, but not the character
- ✓ Leverage your development systems to enhance their skills
- ✓ Challenge them to do the right thing – guarding their motives

Character is too important and too hard to teach, thus it is wise for universities to select for character and train for skills.

Punch line on Leadership Iceberg

"The circumstances amid which you live determine your reputation; the truth you believe determines your character.

Reputation is what you are supposed to be; character is what you are.

Reputation is the photograph; character is the face.

Reputation comes over one from without; character grows up from within.

Reputation is what you have when you come to a new community; character is what you have when you go away.

Your reputation is learned in an hour; your character does not come to light for a year.

Reputation is made in a moment; character is built in a lifetime.

Reputation grows like a mushroom; character grows like the oak.

A single newspaper report gives you your reputation; a life of toil gives you your character.

Reputation makes you rich or makes you poor; character makes you happy or makes you miserable.

Reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone;

character is what angels say about you before the throne of God."

<div align="right">- William Hersey Davis</div>

APPLICATION OF SUSTAINABLE STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

When all is said and done, when a student leader leaves office, the one question that rings in the people's minds is "What did he do for us? How did he help us?" A leader is always judged by his level of service. Sustainable student leadership is one that not only serves but serves the right interests.

It is time that we put to question what motivates student leaders to vie for office. Is it the seductiveness of power and money or it is their magnanimity of heart, their willingness to give and take nothing in return? As was pointed out earlier, the leadership iceberg consists of 10% skill and 90% character. Character is the driving force of sustainable student leadership.

Character is the practice of sound moral habits which are also known as virtues (Havard, 2007). It is therefore important to establish a sustainable model based on servant leadership. We can use the six sustainable leadership principles as an anchor of the virtues that an ideal student leader should have and consistently pursue.

1. **Magnanimity**: Sustainable Leadership creates and preserves sustained learning. A student leader should have greatness of mind and heart. He should not limit his scope to only his term of office and his personal glorifications. He should be willing to take a risk on a vision that shall last beyond him and nourish others.

2. **Prudence**: Sustainable leadership secures success over time. A student leader should be conscious of the future. As such he should not be a victim of circumstance; he should therefore plan and prepare for the successor.

3. **Teamwork**: Sustainable leadership sustains the leadership of others. Man is not an island and the student leader is no exception. He should be able to work with others to further their aspirations and at the same time meet the central goal.

4. **Justice:** Sustainable leadership addresses issues of social justice. A student leaders is not one who favors his supporters and friends only. He is one who ensures that each student irrespective of race, gender, religion or political affiliation, gets his due.

5. **Detachment**: Sustainable leadership develops rather than depletes human and material resources. A student leader should be able to use the resources at hand to meet the goals he has set out; he should not use them as an end in themselves but as a means to an end.

6. **Open-mindedness**: Sustainable Leadership develops environmental diversity and capacity. A student leader cannot shut his eyes and ears to those that are different from him in thought and manner. He should be open cross-fertilization of ideas and views.

7. **Courage:** Sustainable leadership undertakes activist engagement with the environment. A student leader should be bold and assertive in championing for the common good. He should engage those around him, not being a lone soldier but a beacon of hope to those he serves.

CONCLUSION

In summary, leaders develop sustainability by how they approach, commit to and protect deep learning in their schools; by how they sustain themselves and others around them to promote and support that learning; by how they are able and encouraged to sustain themselves in doing so, so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; by how they try to ensure the improvements they bring about last over time, especially after they have gone; by how they consider the impact of their leadership on schools around them; by how they promote and perpetuate ecological diversity rather than standardized prescription in teaching and learning within their schools; and by how they pursue activist engagements with their environments.

Leadership is character, and it is therefore important for African Student Leaders to understand that leaders are not born but made. They must strive to achieve virtue and for their visions not to be clouded by the lust for money and grandeur. It is important that they remain grounded and remember the reason why they took office, to serve.

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