

## **The Centrality of Teamwork in Leadership and Management of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the concept of team management in the leadership and management of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The idea of team management is rooted in theories that emphasize participation, especially school-based management, teamwork, and distributed leadership. With the full democratization of Nigeria's political landscape in 1999, team management became formalized in institutions of higher learning. Decentralization of the decision-making process was embraced. Team management becomes the practice and this was aligned to the purpose or objectives of higher education. These purposes or goals provide the crucial sense of direction that underpins the leadership style of educational institutions. The study is explorative and informative in orientation. In conclusion, the benefits of team management out way the threats and tensions that arise therefrom. This submission implies that further research can be conducted qualitatively using data gathering exploratory techniques.*

## **Introduction**

Tertiary education embraces all organized learning activities at the third tier level of educational development. According to the National Policy of Education (1998), tertiary education/institutions include universities, polytechnics/monotechnics and colleges of education. Globally, tertiary institutions play a pivotal role in the development of society. In respect of universities, Boulton (2010) observed that Universities are seen as crucial national assets that address many policy priorities and are sources of new knowledge and innovative thinking; providers of skilled personnel and credible credentials; contributors to innovation; attractors of international talent and business investment; agents of social justice and mobility; contributors to social and cultural vitality; and determinants of health and well-being.

According to the former Executive Secretary of the National Board of Technical Education (NBTE), Polytechnic education on the other hand is designed to, among others, provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development; impart the necessary skills to produce craftsmen, technicians, technologists and engineers; and to enable men and women to have the intellectual understanding of the increasing complexity of technology and the role it plays around them.

As for the Colleges of Education, they are responsible for the training of teachers to feed the primary and secondary tiers of the educational system in the country. Their importance is derived from the fact that the quality of trained teachers determines the quality of the products of these sectors which eventually enter the universities and polytechnics.

A significant development in the Nigerian education system over the last two decades is the emphasis on school-based management and its allied management approaches. The tendency to regard Vice-Chancellors, Rectors and Provosts as absolutely responsible for leadership and management of tertiary institutions is gradually fading away and is being replaced by the notion that leadership and management are the prerogative of many, if not all stakeholders in educational institutions. In Nigeria, the National

Universities Commission (NUC) for Universities, National Board of Technical Education (NBTE) for Polytechnics/Monotechnics and National Commission of Colleges of Education (NCCE) have attempted to give substance to this purpose by providing institutional directives to guide educational managers in the implementation of decentralized management structures, such as Senate in the university system, Academic Boards in Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, the Students' Representative Council (SRC), and the School Governing Council (SGC).

The political/social imperative to democratize the tertiary education system is strongly supported in the literature. There is significant evidence to support the notion that hierarchical, top-down structures are no more appropriate for school leadership and management. Owens (2001), for example, is of the view that the "... top-down exercise of power and centralized control have incontrovertibly failed to produce the organizational results the advocates of traditional organizational theory claimed it would". Similarly, leadership theory has moved systematically and progressively away from the notion of the single, 'heroic' leadership. While transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2004) may still seem to be privileged over the power of the individual over many, post-transformational approaches stress participation and teamwork. These developments have occurred within a different conceptualization of 'organization', where more rigid notions associated with bureaucracy have gradually given way to more flexible, 'intelligent' constructs, such as in the learning organization (Jamali, Khoury & Sahyoun, 2006).

It is on this premise that in this study we sought to explore experiences of School Management Teams (SMTs) as the structural sites of participative management within Nigeria's tertiary institutions.

### **Literature Exploration/Review**

The gradual shift towards school-based management (SBM) in education systems has been a worldwide phenomenon, driven by the dual imperatives of changing societal values and innovation (Walker, 1994). SBM is seen as having the potential to reflect social

values of democratic participation as well as respond quickly and flexibly to contextual challenges (*ibid.*). The increased emphasis on participation in management has resulted in a renewed interest in teamwork, team management and leadership in particular.

In this brief literature review, we attempt to find conceptual and practical coherence among these three inter-related concepts: school-based management, teamwork, and team leadership. In line with this development has been the evolution of leadership approaches that de-emphasize the individual leader and stress group or team leadership. One of the most prominent of these is distributed leadership (MacBeath, 2005; Bauer & Bogotch, 2006).

### **School-based Management**

This is the decentralization and democratization of decision-making in schools advocated by education practitioners and Boards of Education both at the lower and higher levels of education. SBM is based on democratic principles which enable broader participation by those 'on the ground' dealing directly with issues that need to be resolved by people who potentially have 'on ground' expertise. This view posits that the school as an organization is less locked into overhead control and authority (Jamali *et al.*, 2006). According to Cheun and Cheng (1996), SBM shifts the locus of accountability as "schools shift from external control management to active self-management". In SBM, all organizational members will be accountable for their practice, to themselves, to each other, and authority at the top.

### **Teamwork**

The advantages of teamwork are also well documented. Indeed, Stott and Walker (1999) suggest that "the advantages of teamwork are taken almost for granted, given the extensive coverage in recent education literature". The benefits mentioned include among others "collaboration, empowerment, co-operation and consultation" (*ibid.*). They cite arguments that teamwork provides teachers with "a significant role in school decision making", "control over their work environment", and "opportunities to contribute to a range of professional roles" (*ibid.*). Lastly, they

record the claims that teams can solve problems more creatively than individual leaders and that modern organizations need 'processing machines' to deal with the overwhelming flow of information (*ibid.*).

More importantly, there is a growing understanding of the conditions necessary for effective teamwork, and the characteristics of effective team functioning. These are broadly described in two-fold: structural and cultural. The argument is that teamwork needs favourable conditions of both structural and cultural nature to flourish.

### **Structural Support**

By 'structure' is meant that the logistical arrangements and decisions that need to be made to accommodate teamwork in schools. Schools are by nature highly structured organizations, usually with clear lines of hierarchy and accountability (Bush, 2003). This feature is systemically linked to the self-evident reality that schools are complex organizations, peopled by complex individuals, often drawn from a range of cultures, all working together towards the goal of effective teaching and learning. Moving towards a 'flatter' structure is, therefore, a significant challenge, but it is a challenge that needs to be faced if team management is to succeed. A hierarchically rigid organizational structure will work against important attributes of team management, such as flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking (Stott & Walker, 1999). This implies that organizational structure needs to accommodate teamwork. Walker (1994) argues that schools need to nurture "more organic organizational patterns". Organic here is taken to mean patterns that are dynamic, growing in response to needs and projects, as opposed to patterns previously determined and static. An organic pattern of functioning suggests a climate in which all team members feel free to participate, and conversation is shaped by interest and participation rather than rigid procedure (Mescht & Tyala, 2008).

Support here refers to more than — but includes — logistics and administrative support. Teamwork needs an investment of time, space, even money. Less obvious, teams need to have free

and easy access to information that is needed to tackle problems. But what teamwork needs from the organization as a whole is more clarity concerning their roles and structures, as well as how each team links with other teams and the organization as a whole (Stott & Walker, 1999).

Team composition is also viewed as a key structural element. Belbin's (1981) elegant model of role allocator to members of teams (co-ordinator, shaper, monitor, implementer, team worker, completer, resource investigator) is widely used and well documented. It is on this basis that he argues for heterogeneity, and this argument finds support in Zahavy & Somech (2001) who see the diversity in teams as the driving force for the achievement of results because people from different backgrounds bring with them different experiences and different knowledge bases.

### **Cultural Support**

'Culture' refers to the culture and climate of a school, the less visible norms and values that inform practice, and the resultant ethos that prevails. Cohesion is widely acknowledged as a key characteristic of effective teams (Dione & Yammarino, 2004; Šumanski & Kolenc, 2007). Cohesion refers to the extent to which team members have feelings that they belong and are happy to work together. It also refers to the extent to which team members agree on and identifies with the work at hand and links with structural support in the sense that a team that knows its role in the organizational structure as a whole is more likely to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. Among the key values that underpin cohesion are trust, openness, and a willingness to participate (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Bauer & Bogotch, 2006). Stashevski and Kowlowski (2006) include "interpersonal attraction, task commitment, and group pride" as key values. These values point to the imperative of interpersonal, social relationships in teams, and also highlight the role of the team leader as coordinator.

However, it would be naive to imagine that teams will simply function without leadership. As Stashevski and Kowlowski (2006) put it: "even a team has a dominant person who, for intent and

purposes, can be called a leader who may well play a central role in determining group performance.” This leads to the third dimension, distributed leadership.

### **Team Leadership**

Despite the dichotomy that characterizes leadership theory, contemporary theories emphasize leadership as relational and ‘constructivist’ (Lambert, 1995), focused on ‘service’ (Russell, 2000), and ‘distributed’ (Macbeath, 2005).

It must however be noted that the notion of distributed leadership is different from delegation. Macbeath (2006) adopts the term “symbiosis” to clarify the difference: Symbiosis is a term used to describe a form of reciprocal relationship in which there exists an implicit give and take and a level of mutual respect while delegation is expressed in ‘giving’ responsibility to others or allowing responsibility by structural default. Culturally, leadership presupposes high levels of mutual trust and willingness to accept others’ leadership. Distributed leadership would seem to be an appropriate approach to follow in leading and managing an organization in which team work is utilized.

Yet, distributed leadership is also not without problem. Bauer and Bogotch (2006) warn that distributing leadership can have negative effects, arguing that “individual possessiveness and security become secondary to the needs of the school”. In systems still geared towards rewarding members on an individual basis, this could become problematic. A more significant threat seems to be the tension school heads may experience between “holding on and letting go” (Macbeath, 2005). This refers to a tension between a desire on the part of school heads to ‘let go’ and enable the distribution of significant responsibilities, and the opposing desire to ‘hold on’ for fear of losing control and perhaps being exposed in the event of team failure. This is certainly the case in Nigeria, where demanding quality assurance measures — such as Total Quality Assurance — are expected to be applied in a ‘developmental’ way.

In conclusion, we hold the view that the most significant ingredient of effective team leadership is the ability to manage

human interaction: Understanding the needs of people for connection and belonging is a critical principle of effective high performing in team leadership. Understanding the team members and their needs for involvement, contributions and overall social interaction of the team is of critical importance (Wing, 2005).

### **The Benefits of Team Management**

#### **Sharing the Load**

The formalization of the School Management Team (SMT) would enable heads of institutions (HI's) to spread and allocate the workload of managing schools among staff members; experts participate in deliberations. The idiom 'many hands make light work' succinctly captures the idea of sharing the workload.

#### **Empowerment and Staff Development**

Another strong benefit is that teachers would be empowered through teamwork. For this, the SMT provided a platform for professional development. They can use delegation to "build on people's strengths", for example, by allocating academic tasks to academically inclined lecturers. Distributing leadership helped to prepare lecturers/teachers for an opportune time when "they would apply for senior posts, so they don't feel unempowered". Opportunities to grow meant "they're going to become better managers or administrators". HI's also distributed duties such as chairing and finalizing the agenda among SMTs. Staff members can begin the responsibility of managing portfolios within the schools because of their "know-how, skills and expertise of some kind".

#### **School-based Policy Development**

Another open advantage is creativity and innovation exemplified by SMTs. They designed "additional guidelines" for their internal school policy because schools' problems were unique and peculiar. Guidelines are formulated from the experience gathered on the job and HODs also formulate departmental policy that is in line with the school policy".



## **Participation**

The strongest advantage is the notion of participative management which is seen as the cornerstone of team management and the effective functioning of SMTs. Staff generally showed high levels of commitment to participative management. It stresses the importance of consultation. Good ideas are sold and endorsed in the SMT meeting and then taken from that point to another higher echelon of authority, thereby de-emphasizing dictatorial tendencies. The culture of debates” is promoted with strengths and difference of opinions exhibited. SMT meetings showed high levels of free and open debate within a participative climate.

## **Threats to Team Management**

### **The Leadership Tension**

A significant tension may be described as a tension between the leader's role in initiating and driving teamwork on the one hand, and being in control and accountable on the other. On the one hand, HIs see themselves as team-workers and delegators. As leaders, HIs are free to exercise their discretion in certain circumstances.

Running counter to the practice of participation, there is this inescapable sense that HIs are accountable to higher authorities, and therefore sometimes acted independently of members' input. Some HIs do everything themselves because as a HI, you cannot abdicate responsibility to somebody else. Hence, HIs often argued that because somebody should be accountable and accountability comes with the package of being head of an institution. They believed that whatever happens at meetings comes back to their tables. The HI is a guilty party when it comes to higher authority's questioning because the head would not be able to bring the person(s) around or change the problem that emanated out of the resolution of the management team. HIs have the final say and he is ultimately accountable.

It must however be noted that the highlighted benefits of team management do not diminish the importance of leadership. Leadership seems even more important in a team environment, both in terms of its role in developing human potential, but more,

importantly, in terms of leaders' acceptance of being ultimately accountable, almost on behalf of team members. Hence HI's felt they needed to be authoritative at times. One of the challenges is the realization that a group of people were not necessarily a 'team'. "More effort should be put towards building a team so that HI's can have a strong team.

An interesting dimension of team management that emerged was the notion of acting in ways that arise from having to be 'politically correct' rather than truly participative. Academic unions more often will not accept resolutions against the interest of their unions though the resolutions may be beneficial to the management. They may also resist and reject decisions taken because they were not part and parcel of the decision-making body. But if there are union leaders in the SMT they may readily accept whatever the SMT comes up with because their interest would have been taken care of. Interestingly, SMTs usually consist only of senior lecturers/professors; other teachers are occasionally 'co-opted' for their expertise.

Often policies of the strong departments where the majority of professors/senior lecturers reside are threats to team management because they would ensure that whatever decisions taken by team management are not contrary to any of the policies of their departments. Managing the institution daily based on the departmental policy is always a challenge to team management.

Disloyalty to the team is sabotage as well as a threat to teamwork. Some SMT members would go around the corner when they seem not to agree with the decision taken at the SMT and thereby polluting the system. One or two people who were in the minority may and who does not share the vision. Thus, they have disruptive tendencies and these are a threat to the team, a sign of danger.

Hence, HI's sometimes found it difficult always to trust all team members, because the job may not be done the way he expects, thereby, not getting personal satisfaction. Many times, lecturers/teachers do not practise what they teach. One may get people who can tell you the most beautiful things in a meeting

situation, the most beautiful ideas; but when it comes to reality it is not implemented.

Team management is also time-consuming. Things are not done in time because of the process of consultation and lobbying which sometimes take time and opinion about an issue don't get the urgent attention it deserves. Based on the time factor it is not easy to agree on an issue, it takes time to debate and in the end, the meeting would be postponed to two or three days hence. Some actions need haste but one may need to consult with the team and this would delay its implementation.

Therefore weighing the positive against the tensions and threat, the overall picture emerging is that team management is overwhelmingly advantageous. HI's by and large practice team management in most of Nigeria's higher institutions, not minding the tension and threat discussed above.

### **Suggestions**

Significantly, HI's must ensure the effective functioning of their schools by distributing responsibilities to members. Leadership is about professional and human resource development, and it follows that the developmental virtue of teamwork identified as benefits in this research should not be compromised. According to Stashevski & Kowlowski, (2006) withdrawing responsibilities from selected team members, affect the effectiveness and interpersonal, 'social' elements of teamwork.

Emotional intelligence is required from HI's and this is strongly associated with participative forms of management and leadership. Emotional intelligence is a key ingredient of building and nourishing relationships, and we argue that this skill lies at the heart of team management in politically and socially tense environments. We would add that the ability to recognize and confront 'secrecy and suspicion' requires courage and a strong sense of confidence.

Literature reports comprehensively on how managers are torn between efficiency — making quick decisions without consulting — and real teamwork, i.e. taking the time to consult and listening to other peoples' views. Naturally, the 'quick fix' approach leads to what Bottery (1992) described as "pseudo" or even "non-

participation.” While it is true that some decisions need to be made quickly and therefore can and should be taken by the HI’s, it is equally true that failing to consult by the use of teams stems from a lack of real commitment to the process of decision-making, through which personal and professional growth is enhanced. Leaders who insist on consultation and constantly look for ways of achieving group decisions are simply expressing respect for their colleagues and reinforcing their commitment to relationships and personal growth.

Leadership training programmes and academic programmes in leadership and management should focus on teamwork and team management, not only as a theoretical issue — though that is important — but also experientially. In other words, courses and programmes should integrate the pedagogy of teamwork and team learning. One way of achieving this would be through utilizing organization development (OD) in course designs. OD principles are inherently aligned with those of participative management and teamwork.

Incorporating experiential learning is another strategy that is likely to yield results. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that the new SMT in school leadership is strongly rooted in experiential and practice-based learning.

Learning about teamwork and team management can not be confined to externally organised courses and programmes, and the chief training ground for organisational learning remains the school itself. Schools need to be learning organisations and clearly, one of the best ways of learning how to work together is through doing precisely that in teams and committees within the school structure. But, as has been shown, this requires cultural (social) support and a disposition on the part of the HI that places the development of human potential on at least the same level as getting the job done.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the benefits and threats highlighted above, this study confirmed that team management through SMTs as the acceptable global practice should be the acceptable norm for most tertiary

institutions in Nigeria and HI's should be committed to its workability. While the study pointed to significant benefits of team management, the tensions and challenges discussed above represent key challenges for educational leaders and managers in Nigeria.

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