Research Article **Open Access**

Leadership Effectiveness in Higher Education Institutions: The IPA Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the leadership effectiveness of leaders in higher education institutions in order to pinpoint possible areas of improvement. Leaders in this context refer to those who assume leadership role in the universities ranging from department head to university president. To approach the problem systematically, descriptive cross sectional research design was employed. About 120 questionnaires were distributed to those leaders from three public universities randomly selected and only 95 questionnaires qualified for analysis. The importance performance grid was used for data analysis and it was supplemented by paired sample t test to see whether the gap between importance and performance is statistically significant. Accordingly, about 28% of the works of the leaders is characterized by high importance and low performance and some 19% of the works is characterized by low importance and high performance. This implies that about 48% of the tasks of those leaders are not on their intended priority schedule. Hence, possible planning and differentiating the daily routines from the strategic works are required for the academic leaders in order to perform their activities based on their level of importance to their universities.

Introduction

Effective leadership is central to an organization's success. Several studies have shown the positive effects of leadership development on a variety of organizational variables such as followers' satisfaction, commitment, and performance [1-3]. These variables are key constants in leadership regardless of contexts. However, the emphasis and weight may differ. According to Sathye [4], leadership in academic institutions is more diverse and complex than leadership in other public and private sectors. Such difference emanates from the fact that leadership in academic institutions is concerned with maximizing such stakeholders' values as students, staff, government, and the public at large. This implies that leaders in academic leaders have to be more competent and effective in order to satisfy these diverse stakeholders at the same time.

However, leadership development in higher education is still an under-investigated field of research and application [5,6]. To date, faculty are appointed to a senior rank based upon their deep subject knowledge, experience, and scientific accomplishment (number of publications in international journals), not based on leadership skills. Subsequently, senior faculty members hold leadership positions without adequate preparation. Moreover, to strengthen organizational effectiveness the expectations placed on senior faculty are often excessively high [7]. Often academic leaders address the resulting work-overload inadequately [8]. However, few authors have taken into consideration the specific challenges faced by academic leaders, such as the complex and dynamic social, economic, and political contexts most colleagues and universities are operating in, as well as the consequences of effective or rather ineffective leadership in higher education [9]. In spite of the enormous importance of effective leadership in higher education, concrete suggestions for specific development programs are scarce. Such scarcity poses a challenge which leadership education is supposed to address and what academic leaders need to be more concerned about.

According to Day [10], the approaches to facilitate effective leadership can be differentiated into leader and leadership development through purposeful investment in human capital that typically emphasizes individual-based knowledge, skills, and abilities. The outcomes such as the development of informed citizens, creative professionals, people who can work with diversity – are much harder to measure than indicators associated with bottom line measures like profitability may not be easily measured at least in the short run as the case is straightforward in business organizations; but it can be sensed and seen through incremental changes [11] in academic institutions.

Leadership is multifunctional which involves managing through others, and helps organizations cope with change that seems to be increasing exponentially in today's globalised environment [12]. In this regard, a number of studies offer detailed accounts of what academic leaders should know and be able to do. Ramsden [13] suggests that effective leadership in higher education institutions entails; leadership in teaching, leadership in research, strategic networking and vision, transformational and collaborative leadership, fair and efficient management, development and recognition of performance, and interpersonal skills.

Statement of the problem

Higher education plays a major part in shaping the quality of leadership in modern society. In addition to effectively using the budgets allotted to them, university leaders are also expected to be engaged in value adding activities in the society in such interventions as research and community services [14].

College and university faculty also exert important influences on the leadership process through their research and scholarship, which seeks both to clarify the meaning of leadership and to identify the most

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effective approaches to leadership and leadership education. On a more practical level, students are probably going to be influenced at least as much by what academics do as by what they say in the classroom lectures and advising sessions [5]. Hence, leadership effectiveness in higher education institutions has dual purposes; on the one hand, being effective leader has to do with employment of the right resources for the right task as ordered by the level of importance. On the other hand, students can learn from the leaders' actions and hence enables them to develop a sense that being effective is not just theoretical [5,15].

Being effective in universities has to do with achieving the vision and mission of becoming academic excellence [13] on the one hand and significantly contributing for the national economy through such engagements as problem solving research and community services on the other hand. Thus, the central research question of this study is, therefore, how effective are leaders in Ethiopian higher educational institutions? In line with the central question, the following specific research questions were raised:

a) What activities do leaders in HEIs level as important?

b) Which of these activities do they actually perform better?

c) How do their performances mach with their priority/important tasks?

Objectives of the research

The general objective of the research was to examine the effectiveness of leaders in Ethiopian higher education institutions in order to identify critical areas and enable leaders reconsider their performances in line with their priority issue.

In line with the general objective, the specific objectives of this study were to:

• Examine the activities which are leveled as important in HEIs

• Assess the activities leaders perform better

• Compare how performances are matched with priority areas/ importance

Methodology

This research employed a survey method to measure the perception of leaders in higher education institutions about their activities which they labeled as important and the activities they actually performed. Hence, leadership effectiveness is examined in terms of the match between perceived importance and performance of activities.

The more the difference is closer to zero, the better the effectiveness is while zero deviation implies the ideal effectiveness.

Three old government universities were randomly selected and respondents in these universities were considered almost on census bases. We used a five point likert scale to measure the importance (1 = very unimportant to 5 = very important) and performance (1 = very low 5 = very high) attributed to major activities in universities. In total, there are 20 major activities identified from effectiveness in higher education institutions literatures. Empirical data were collected from academic leaders in the three selected universities using the adapted questionnaire and 120 respondents filled the questionnaire and amongst those only 95 questionnaires qualified for analysis. Then the data were analyzed using the IPA grid followed by paired sample t-test to see whether the difference between performances and importance is statically significant.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Respondents were asked to rate using a five point Likert scale, with items regarding their level agreement on leadership effectiveness based on their priority and their actual performance. Scale anchors ranged from: *very important* (5) to not important (1). Similarly respondents were asked to rate their performances in line with their rate of importance ranging from (5)- very high to (1)- very low.

Descriptive statistics

Accordingly, the Table 1 below shows that respondents rate almost all of the measured variables as important as the mean value is above than the expected average value of 3.00. However, some of the variables have higher mean score than the others indicating their relative importance as perceived by the respondents. In line with this, respondents felt higher importance for goal of personal development (4.74), on time job and specification delivery (4.65), collegial work environment (4.55), and bringing innovative policies and practices (4.54). However, relative low importance is given to students' retention rate (3.57), learning and teaching awards (3.97), and key groups in teaching and learning activities (3.95).

On the contrary, the grand average of performance score is 3.24 which is much lower than the average score of importance (4.3) indicating the gap between importance and performance. In this regard, relative higher performances are observed in goals of personal development (3.78), students' retention rate (3.59), high level of staff support (3.65), and improving students' satisfaction (3.56). Two of these variables have also higher importance scores and hence the congruence indicates doing as per priority (perceived level of importance). On the other hand, low performance scores are observed in securing funds (2.45), learning and teaching awards (2.71), key groups in teaching learning (2.72), and publication (2.85). In this regard, it is not surprising for learning and teaching awards and key groups in teaching

Variables	Mean importance	Mean performance	Mean Difference (p-i)
securing fund	4.2	2.45	**-1.75**
student retention rate	3.57	3.59	**0.02**
high quality graduate outcome	4.41	3.48	**-0.93**
goal for personal development	4.74	3.78	**-0.96**
bringing innovative policies and practices	4.54	3.23	**-1.31**
successful team projects in teaching learning	4.48	3.11	**-1.37**
successful learning system	4.39	3.13	**-1.26**
learning and teaching awards	3.97	2.71	**-1.26**
winning resources	4.11	3.01	**-1.1**
On time job and specification delivery	4.65	3.4	**-1.25**
improvement in teaching learning quality	4.4	3.43	**-0.97**
high level of stuff support	4.26	3.65	**-0.61**
key groups in teaching learning	3.95	2.72	**-1.23**
improving students' satisfaction	4.26	3.56	**-0.7**
collegial work environment	4.55	3.42	**-1.13**
implementation of new initiatives	4.46	3.42	**-1.04**
representation of equity groups	4.34	3.26	**-1.08**
achieving positive outcomes from external	4.31	3.25	**-1.06**
producing future learners and leaders	4.37	3.27	**-1.1**
publication	4.06	2.85	**-1.21**
Average	**4.301**	**3.236**	**-1.065**

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of variables.

and learning variables to have lower performance scores as they are also perceived to be of low priority (have low importance scores).

However, lower perceived performance score on publication indicates serious gap as research is one of the three pillars of higher education institutions mission and it is the way to disseminate research output and academic and industry like discourses. Besides, recent university performance and significance is evaluated, among few other things, by number of publication appeared on the web.

As it is presented in the above table, the mean score of importance is higher that mean score of performance implying that leaders in academic institutions perform lower than what they think is important. However, whether such deviation is statistically significant or not remains unanswered until the following paired sample t-test is computed (Tables 2 and 3).

The grand average of importance is 4.3 and the grand average of performance is 3.2 implying a deviation of 1.06 with standard deviation of 0.83. At a 95% confidence level, the deviation is found to be statistically significant (p-value of '000) implying that performance is significantly deviated from importance. This indicates that academic leaders are more overwhelmed by daily routines than strategic activities which they labeled as important. Hence, routine tasks dominate their major activities which can be minimized by planning and effective time management.

The importance performance analysis (IPA)

The application of IPA provides management insights to identify company strengths and weaknesses for improving company performance [16]. This technique identifies strengths and weaknesses of strategic implementation in terms of two criteria that respondents were presented with. One criterion is the relative importance of attributes. The other is respondents' evaluation of their performance in terms of those similar attributes. It starts with an identification of a list of attributes (20 pairs of attributes in this study) that are relevant to the situations chosen to be investigated [17-19].

The list of attributes was developed after consulting the relevant literatures in strategic management and leadership. By using the typical central tendency measure for IPA (mean), importance and performance scores are ordered and classified into high or low categories, and then by pairing these two sets of rankings, each attribute is placed into one of the four quadrants that are displayed graph using an importance-performance matrix as in following Figure 1.

Although there is no standard as to how much of the respondents are expected in each of the quadrants, it is highly expected that they should be found in quadrant II (keep up the good work). The details of the discussion about the four quadrants are presented and interpreted as follow.

i. Concentrate here - high importance, low performance: requires immediate attention for improvement and are major weaknesses. In this regard, 28% of the respondents belong to this group. This may imply that about a third of leaders in higher education failed to implement what they think is important. Such failure in doing what is supposed to do can also be attributed to lack of planning, being guided by current routines and unable to monitor activities as per the plan. Hence, this area should be viewed as critical performance shortfalls and the leaders' responsibility is to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to improve performances in this area.

ii. Keep up with the good work - high importance, high performance: indicate opportunities for achieving or maintaining competitive advantage and are major strengths. In connection to this, 39% of the respondents belong to this group. Under normal circumstance, this number is better to be as high as possible. And leasers in this area are advised to ensure that their universities at least to maintain their performances. However, the far less than half of the respondents belong to this group. Strategic leaders are expected to be planned, effective, and inspirational in order for their visions be realized. Hence, what they level activities as important should be based on critical evaluation of their environments. And at the same time they channel the company resources in these important areas as such areas are critical for the success of their organizations.
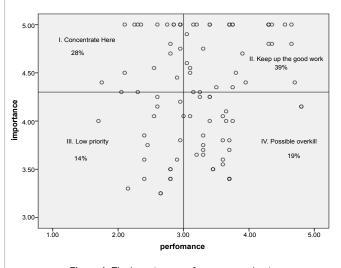

Figure 1: The importance performance quadrants.

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	average importance	4.30	95	0.57840	0.05934
	average performance	3.24	95	0.70093	0.07191

Table 2: Paired samples statistics.

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	importance performance	1.07	0.83375	0.08554	0.89437	1.23405	12.441	94	0.000

Table 3: Paired samples test.

iii. Low priority - low importance, low performance: these are minor weaknesses and do not require additional effort and they may be candidates for discontinuation of resources/effort. Since low importance is given to it, low performance poor performance should not be given emphasis by the leaders. In this regard, about 14% of the respondents belong to this group. It is expected that if the activity is labeled as low important then resources should not be allocated to it unless other areas are covered and there remains leftover resource. Hence, it is expected in this quadrant to have the lowest number of individual in this quadrant.

iv. Possible overkill - low importance, high performance: indicate that university resources committed to these attributes would be overkill and should be diverted to elsewhere. Regarding this, 19% of the respondents belong to this group. This may imply that about one fifth of the respondents spend their time in activities which is not strategic. Besides, resources committed in these areas are in expense of resources committed in quadrant II because organizational resources are limited.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Although leadership is not a magic cure, it played a key role in effecting significant organizational change and improvement in higher education institutions [20]. Hence, leadership effectiveness in HEIs is very important as it shoulders dual responsibility. On the one hand, academic leaders are there to develop skilled manpower through utilizing the tax payers budget. Hence, using their resources, including budget, appropriately and according to the activities priority is of at most important. On the other hand, students cannot learn from just theories; they also learn from how things are performed in their universities. Hence, students learn from what academic leaders do as equally as from theories.

As a result, the findings indicate that only 39% of the academic leaders are on the desired quadrant (high importance, high performance) in the IPA matrix. And about 33% are engaged in low priority activities. Hence, being effective means doing the right thing at the right time. This may imply that academic leaders need to differentiate and prioritize strategic activities from daily routines so that first prioritized activity can be performed first.

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