



Assessment of the effectiveness of leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs

Paul Nemashakwe ^{1*}, Alice Z Zinyemba ², Samuel M Gumbe ³

¹ Department of Business Management, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

²⁻³ Department of Business Enterprise and Management, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

* Corresponding Author: Paul Nemashakwe

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Abstract

Scholars, policy makers and analysts agree that the future development of any country rests on the shoulders of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). However, despite the enormity of benefits that can be realised from SMEs, research shows that the majority are plagued by a high failure rate blamed largely on a dearth in managerial skills and ineffective leadership. This calls for continuous assessment of leadership effectiveness so that remedial action can be taken where leadership is found to be ineffective. The purpose of the study was to assess the effectiveness of leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs. Quantitative research was conducted using a survey strategy. Primary data was collected using a closed-ended questionnaire from 241 participants from Bulawayo's Central Business Area. The study concluded that leadership was not effective in Zimbabwean SMEs. In order to engender effective leadership, SMEs leaders are encouraged to reward employees when they do what is expected of them. They should come up with novel ways of keeping employees motivated, engaged and committed over and above rewarding them. SMEs leaders should devise mechanisms to help employees move ahead in their careers.

Keywords: career development, employee commitment, effective leadership, leadership, SMEs

1. Introduction

Scholars, policy makers and analysts agree that the future development of any country rests on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (Albloshi and Nawar, 2015) ^[1]. SMEs are regarded as the backbone of most economies (Rahim, Abidin, Mohtar and Ramli, 2015) ^[38]. This is because they assist in the reduction of unemployment levels (Karedza, Sikwila, Mpfu and Makurumidze, 2014) ^[18], boost a nation's exports (Mudavanhu, Bindu, Chigusiwa and Muchabaiwa, 2011) ^[29] and enhance competition (Chipangura and Kaseke, 2012) ^[4]. However, African SMEs in general and Zimbabwean SMEs in particular have been plagued by a high failure rate. 60% of Zimbabwean SMEs fail to celebrate their first anniversary with a further 25% folding within the first three years. This leaves only 15% as the likely survivors (Mudavanhu *et al.*, 2011) ^[29].

The high failure rate plaguing SMEs has been blamed largely on a dearth in managerial skills (Bomani, Fields and Derera, 2015; Karedza *et al.*, 2014; Dumbu and Chadamoyo, 2012) ^[3, 18, 9] and ineffective leadership (Daka, Sandada and Mbasera, 2017; Saasongu, 2015; Jalal-Eddeen, 2015) ^[7, 39, 16]. Madanchian and Taherdoost (2017) ^[22] observed that SMEs' failure was largely caused by deficient and weak leadership skills. Survival and growth of SMEs is highly dependent on leadership effectiveness (Lekhanya, 2015; Albloshi and Nawar, 2015) ^[20, 1]. Leadership has been found to be the most significant aspect contributing to the performance of an enterprise (Rahim *et al.*, 2015) ^[38]. Employing right leadership behaviours has been found to enhance the viability and success of SMEs (Arham, Boucher and Muenjohn, 2013) ^[2]. Right leadership behaviour placates an organisation from failure and ensures superior performance (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2017) ^[22]. If Zimbabwean SMEs are to survive and achieve sustainable success, leadership should be effective. In order to achieve that, continuous assessment of leadership effectiveness should be carried out and where leadership is found to be ineffective, key remedial measures should be taken. As such, the purpose of the current study was to assess the effectiveness of leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs.

1.1 Problem statement

Although SMEs are important to the Zimbabwean economy because of the enormity of the benefits realised from them, their capacity is militated by high failure rates largely blamed on ineffective leadership. If the high failure rate is to be reversed and SMEs assisted to grow and prosper, the effectiveness of leadership should be assessed first and where it is found to be ineffective, appropriate remedial action should be taken. The challenge is whether leadership is effective in Zimbabwean SMEs or not hence the need for an assessment.

1.2 Research objective

The study was guided by the following objective.

1. To assess the effectiveness of leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs?.

2. Literature review

2.1 Leadership

Over the years, leadership has proved to be a concept that is hard to define (Silva, 2016; Peretomode, 2015) ^[42, 36]. This has resulted in the propagation of numerous definitions and explanations (McCleskey, 2014) ^[25]. However, this study was guided by Silva (2016, p. 3)'s ^[42] definition which views leadership as "the process of interactive influence that occurs when in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals". Leadership is a desire to impact people's lives in a positive way (Mango, 2018) ^[24]. It is a two-way process which involves both the leader and followers (Youssef, 2013) ^[46]. Followers are important in the leadership matrix because they provide the vital feedback and contributions that are necessary for the leaders to effectively accomplish their tasks (Mwangi, 2014) ^[30].

2.2 Attributes of effective leadership

Leadership ranks among one of the critical components of an organisation that determines whether it succeeds or not (Kumar and Matheen, 2019) ^[19]. Summarising Means (1989), Mwenje (2015) ^[31] gives four attributes associated with effective leaders. Firstly, leaders are known to be active listeners who passionately desire to understand the needs of their followers. Secondly, they assemble a cohesive team through allowing participation and nurturing followers. Effective leaders after understanding their followers' needs, reward and build them to their full capacity and lastly create a balance between individual, group and job priorities.

Effectiveness in leadership is not only dependent on the leader's characteristics as enunciated by the traits approach to leadership but also on the characteristics of the situation they find themselves in (Vidal, Campdesuner, Rodriguez and Vivar, 2017) ^[44]. This was supported by Grobler and Singh (2018) ^[13] who referred to context as a fundamental component of leadership. Sharma and Jain (2013) ^[41] asserted that in most instances the situation has a greater effect on the actions of the leader rather than his or her traits. For example, the quality of leaders any society can have depends to a large extent on the society from which the leaders emerge (Gumede, 2017) ^[14]. A society predicated on violence will find it very difficult to produce non-violent leaders.

Effective leadership results in employees being satisfied (Dalluay and Jalagat, 2016; Albloshi and Nawar, 2015) ^[8, 1]. A study by Popli and Rizvi (2016) ^[37] showed a significant correlation between leadership and employee engagement. Effective leadership will result in engaged employees who

are involved and exhibit greater enthusiasm for work. These employees will be excited to come to work and provide their all. Effective leadership results in employees who are motivated (Nyanga, 2013) ^[34]. Such employees will be committed to their work (Naile and Selesho, 2014) ^[32]. However, when leadership is ineffective, employees will exhibit less enthusiasm and will be detached from organisational activities (Gabriela and Dorinela, 2017) ^[10]. Such employees will not be willing to assume any additional responsibilities should they arise.

Effective leadership encompasses supporting employees in career development (Litano and Major, 2016) ^[21]. An effective leader is one who assists employees to reach the highest possible degree of personal development (Nyanga, 2012) ^[35]. Leaders who assist in the development of employees engender job satisfaction on the part of employees (Yoon, Chang, Sadique and Balushi, 2021) ^[45]. This will in turn bring in superior results (Mourao, 2018) ^[28].

Effective leaders should continuously look for superior ways to influence employees to consistently achieve organisational goals (Igbaekemen, 2014) ^[15]. Leadership can only be seen as effective if it brings superior performance that results in the organisation achieving its goals consistently (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2017) ^[22]. A study by Su and Baird (2017) ^[43] found that effective leaders play a prominent role in enhancing the achievement of organisational goals. This is because effective leaders inspire employees to work hard to accomplish organisational goals (Meraku, 2017) ^[26].

However, Daka (2016) ^[6] found that SMEs lacked effective leadership capacity to grow their businesses and achieve sustainable success. These findings were consistent with the findings of Gombarume and Mavhundutse (2014) ^[12] and Karedza *et al.* (2014) ^[18].

3. Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research design. The design was chosen because it enabled the quantification of opinions, attitudes and behaviours (Mohajan, 2020) ^[27]. The study employed a survey strategy where primary data was collected using a questionnaire because it is the widely used strategy in the social sciences (Neuman, 2014) ^[33]. The population of the study encompassed all non-managers, supervisors, managers and owner-managers of SMEs operating in Bulawayo's Central Business Area (CBA). Primary data was collected from a sample of 300 participants chosen through proportional stratified sampling technique. The technique was ideal because the researchers had prior knowledge of the population (Jawale, 2012) ^[17] and it allowed for the generalisation of findings to be made (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016) ^[40]. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Descriptive statistics in particular frequency distributions were used to show the frequency of occurrence of each possible outcome. The study was carried out in a way that observed the best interests of research participants (Magwa and Magwa, 2015) ^[23] and in line with contemporary research ethical principles.

4. Findings and discussion

241 questionnaires were returned out of 300 that had been distributed, giving a response rate of 80.3%. This was considered sufficient to allow for statistical analysis to proceed (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; Cohen *et al.*, 2007) ^[40, 5].

4.1 Demographic profile of respondents

The majority (62.2%) of respondents were non-managerial followed by 26.1% who were supervisory respondents. 6.6%

of the respondents were owner-managers while the remaining 5% were managers as shown by table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Position	Non-managerial	150	62.2
	Supervisor	63	26.1
	Manager	12	5.0
	Owner-manager	16	6.6
	Total	241	100

Source: Field work

The fact that non-managerial respondents were the majority was consistent with the structuring of most organisations. Owner-managers were more than managers because most entrepreneurs started their businesses and actively participated in the management of those businesses.

4.2 Effective leadership

In order to understand whether leadership practiced in the different SMEs was effective, respondents were presented with five statements and asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statements. Results are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Responses on effective leadership

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Employees are excited to come to work and provide their all.	7.1	71.8	13.7	6.6	0.8
Employees are motivated to take on additional responsibilities.	7.1	66.0	15.4	11.2	0.4
Employees are committed to the decisions made by their superior.	5.4	61.4	22.4	10.0	0.8
Managers assist employees in career development.	1.2	83.0	11.6	3.7	0.4
The goals of the organisation are consistently met.	0.8	81.3	12.9	4.1	0.8

Source: Field work

From table 2 above it can be deduced that the majority of the respondents (ranging from 66.8% to 84.2%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed with all the five statements aimed at understanding whether leadership practiced in the different SMEs was effective.

Research findings showed that the majority of the respondents were of the view that employees were not excited to come to work and provide their all. This could have been as a result of a number of reasons which include employees not being rewarded when they did what was expected of

them, leaders not showing concern for employees and leaders being unapproachable. An analysis of the findings showed that both employees and managers were of the view that employees were not excited to come to work. For instance, 84% of non-managerial, 63.5% of supervisory, 100% of managers and 75.1% of owner-managerial respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that employees were excited to come to work and provide their all as shown by table 3 below.

Table 3: Employees are excited to come to work and provide their all - in relation to organisational position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	6.0	78.0	9.3	5.3	1.3
Supervisor	4.8	58.7	23.8	12.7	
Manager	33.3	66.7			
Owner-manager	6.3	68.8	25.0		

Source: Fieldwork; ($\chi^2 = 28.807$ $df = 12$, $p < 0.01$)

23.8% of supervisors and 25% of owner-managers decided to remain neutral. The nature of leadership employed in an organisation determines whether employees are happy to come to work and provide their all. Effective leadership style impacts positively on employees' satisfaction (Dalluay and Jalagat, 2016; Albloshi and Nawar, 2015) [8, 1]. When employees are satisfied, they will happily come to work and provide their all. Effective leadership will result in engaged employees who are involved and exhibit greater enthusiasm for work (Popli and Rizvi, 2016) [37]. These employees are excited to come to work and provide their all. We can infer from the findings that leadership was ineffective hence employees were not excited to come to work and provide their all.

An analysis of research findings demonstrated that employees were not motivated to take on additional

responsibilities. All the managers and 81.3% of the owner-managers were of the view that employees were not motivated to take on additional responsibilities. The majority of non-managerial (78.7%) and supervisory respondents (52.4%) were also of the same view. Leadership style and leader characteristics can be blamed for lack of employee motivation (Nyanga, 2013) [34]. We can infer from the findings that the reason why employees were not motivated to take on additional responsibilities was because of ineffective reward systems. Employees were not rewarded when they did what was expected of them which means that even if they took additional responsibilities, there was little benefit for them. Effective leaders will come up with novel ways of keeping employees motivated, engaged and committed even in harsh economic circumstances. Ineffective leadership may result in employees feeling less

enthusiastic and detached from organisational activities (Gabriela and Dorinela, 2017) ^[10]. Implementing an effective leadership style will motivate employees to be committed to their work (Naile and Selesho, 2014) ^[35] which will result in them accepting additional responsibilities.

Research findings showed that employees were not committed to the decisions made by their superiors. The majority of managers (91.7%) and owner-managers (68.8%) believed that employees were not committed to the decisions of their superiors as shown by table 4 below.

Table 4: Commitment of employees to the decisions made by their superiors in relation to organisational position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	4.7	67.3	22.7	4.0	1.3
Supervisor	3.2	46.0	27.0	23.8	
Manager	25.0	66.7	8.3		
Owner-manager	6.3	62.5	12.5	18.8	

Source: Fieldwork; (*chi-square* = 32.582 *df* = 12, *p*<0.01)

72% of non-managerial and 49.2% of supervisory respondents were of the view that they were not committed to the decisions of their superiors. 22.7% of non-managerial and 27% of supervisory respondents were neutral. When leadership is effective and employees have confidence in their leaders, they will be committed to the decisions that are made by their leaders (Goe and Martey, 2020). We can infer from the findings that ineffective leadership was the reason why employees were not committed to the decisions of their superiors.

An analysis of research findings showed that managers were not assisting employees in career development. The majority of managers (83.3%) and owner-managers (62.5%) were of the view that as managers they were not assisting employees

in career development. The majority of non-managerial (90.6%) and supervisory respondents (74.6%) were also of the same view. From the findings we can infer that leadership was not effective because leaders were not fulfilling their responsibility of assisting employees in career development. Effective leadership involves assisting employees in career development (Mourao, 2018; Litano and Major, 2016; Nyanga, 2012) ^[28, 21, 35].

Research findings showed that the majority of the respondents were of the view that the goals of the organisation were not consistently met. The majority of non-managerial (88.6%) and supervisory respondents (74.6%) were of the view that organisational goals were not consistently met as shown by table 5 below.

Table 5: Goals of the organisation are consistently met in relation to organisational position

Dimension	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Non-managerial	1.3	87.3	8.0	2.0	1.3
Supervisor		74.6	20.6	4.8	
Manager		75.0	25.0		
Owner-manager		56.3	18.8	25.0	

Source: Fieldwork; (*chi-square* = 24.205 *df* = 12, *p*<0.01)

Also, the majority of managers (75%) and owner-managers (56.3%) were of the same opinion. 25% of managers and 18.8% of owner-managers were neutral. Only 4.9% of the total respondents were of the view that the goals of the organisation were consistently met. Leadership is effective when it brings superior performance that results in the organisation consistently achieving its goals (Madanchian and Taherdoost, 2017 ^[22]; Su and Baird, 2017; Meraku, 2017) ^[43, 26]. As such we can infer that leadership was ineffective.

When leadership is effective, employees will be excited to come to work and provide their all. They will also be motivated to take on additional responsibilities and be committed to the decisions that are made by their superiors. This will ultimately lead to organisations consistently meeting their goals. Research findings demonstrated that leadership was not effective in Zimbabwean SMEs. These findings are consistent with the findings of Daka (2016) ^[6]; Saasongu (2015) ^[39]; Jalal-Eddeen (2015) ^[16]; Gombarume and Mavhundutse (2014) ^[12]; Karedza *et al.* (2014) ^[18].

5. Conclusion

The objective of the study was to assess the effectiveness of leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs. The study concluded that leadership was not effective in Zimbabwean SMEs. This is because employees were not excited to come to work and provide their all and were not motivated to take on additional

responsibilities. The study also concluded that leadership was not effective in Zimbabwean SMEs because employees were not committed to the decisions of their superiors. Leadership was also not effective as evidenced by managers not assisting employees in career development and the goals of the organisations not being consistently met.

6. Recommendations

In order to engender effective leadership, SMEs leaders are encouraged to reward employees when they do what is expected of them. Leaders should also be approachable and always show concern for employees. This will result in employees being excited to come to work and providing their all. SMEs leaders are encouraged to come up with novel ways of keeping employees motivated, engaged and committed over and above rewarding them when they do what is expected of them. This will result in employees being motivated to take on additional responsibilities as and when they arise. In order to stimulate effective leadership, leaders should develop an interest in the careers of their employees and devise mechanisms to help employees move ahead in their careers. Future researchers are recommended to explore the applicability of leadership models used by Zimbabwean SMEs and in cases where they are not applicable, recommend appropriate models.

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