Exploration of how ethical leadership is understood in the Zimbabwe non-governmental organizations sector

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how ethical leadership is understood in the Zimbabwe NGOs sector among the eight selected NGO leaders and three key informants who participated in the research. A qualitative methodology was employed and detailed interviews were conducted with the study participants to collect the required data. Accordingly, the research design is a multiple case study taking a cross-sectional form. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews focused on exploring the study participants' views on ethical leadership based on their expertise and lived experiences working in or with the NGOs within the Zimbabwe context. Data analysis used thematic analysis based on the themes identified in the literature. The major finding was that ethical leadership comprises ethical values, moral competence and good conduct in society with the objective to respond to societal needs and problems for the common good. From the findings, it is concluded that ethical leadership might appear easy to understand conceptually but clearly difficult to practise consistently due to a number of contextual factors that include personal values and prevailing economic situation.

Keywords: Behaviour, Ethics, Ethical leadership, Moral, Moral competence, Values,

Introduction

This paper builds on the current need to explore the nature of ethical leadership in the NGO sector and their resultant effects on humanitarian and development discourse (Toor & Ofori, 2009). In Africa, most studies on ethics have focused on the private sector and little in the NGOs sector (Cheteni and Shindika, 2017). It is generally understood that ethical leaders are those who, in practice, who demonstrate the values of honesty, integrity, trustworthy, fair and altruism with the desire to improve societal quality of life (Cavalieri, 2007; Hartnett & Matan, 2018). From the scholarship on leadership, it can be seen that the term leadership is almost synonymous with the term ethical leadership because it is generally expected that one leads for the common good of society. Furthermore, ubuntu is a characteristic associated with African virtue that has implications on leaders' behaviour (Brubaker, 2013).

Increasingly, the world is experiencing unethical leadership in organisations including NGOs (Toor & Ofori, 2009). In Zimbabwe, some NGOs tend to engage in civic affairs because of the

opportunity to make money for themselves and less about addressing the genuine needs and problems of the people (Makwerere, 2017). It has also been noted that unprocedural recruitment, corruption, misuse of funds, imposition ofdevelopment projects on communities, ill-treatment of beneficiaries and unsympathetic media coverage is quite common in the NGOs sector (Crack, 2016).

It is without a doubt that any unethical leadership practice reduces the organization's credibility and compromises its legitimacy and effectiveness in promoting meaningful development (Gugerty, 2010; Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003). In view of this, it can be seenthat an utmost due diligence has to be applied in the selection and recruitment of personnel to occupy leadership positions in organizations. This is because leadership practice has wide-reaching effects to society and if the effects ae adverse, the implications to the citizens' socio-economic development is also greatly retarded. Principles of Ubuntu, as a leadership philosophy, can also be utilised in leadership identification as it emphasises ethical being, collectivism and relationships over material things, including ownership of opportunities, responsibilities (Nzimakwe, 2014). Inthis regard, it is quite commendable that the National Association of non-governmental organizations in Zimbabwe [NANGO] developed a voluntary code of ethics in 2004 to help NGOs align their operations to ethical practice and governance. Scholars in the NGOs sector contend that when NGOs adhere to ethical conduct in their work, they are highly likely to fulfil their humanitarian and development mandate (Hartnett & Matan, 2018; Sithole, 2019).

Literature Review

Theoretical Underpinning

The paper is anchored on the Stewardship theory which has its roots in the fields of psychology and sociology. The theory was developed following the seminal work by Donaldson and Davis (1989/1991) where, initially, it was designed for the corporate sector but later extended to organisations outside the corporate sector, including the NGOs (Wilson, 2010; Coule, 2013). The theory refers to leaders as agents whose motivation is to act in the principals' interests rather than own. In other words, the stewardship theory states that leaders in any organisation are trusted custodians of what the organization stands for and its desired transformation in society (Caldwell et al., 2010). Within the context of the NGOs sector, leaders are stewards of assets, help improve decision making, uphold accountability to address needs and problems of the citizens for the societal common good (Coule, 2013). Block (2013) has the view that it is less likely for one to become an ethical leader without possessing attributes of stewardship. The author illuminates that stewardship involves an ethical responsibility where leaders are ethical stewards who act on behalf of others rather than self-interest. In other words, steward leadersfulfil their responsibilities and mutual obligation for the good of their organizations and society at large. Block's (2013) proposition is a built-up from Okpala and

Caldwell (2019) and Othman and Rahman (2014) who earlier argued that stewardship is one of the theories of organizational governance which situates managers as trusted administrators of the organization's property and its mandate. Given the characteristics of this theory discussed here, authors of this paper selected it to guide the the discourse of the subject matter because of the inseparability of stewardship and ethical leadership practices.

Methodology

Since this was an exploration undertaking to establish the ethical leadership issues and lived experiences in the Zimbabwe NGOs sector, the authors employed a qualitative research methodology. Within this broad methodological trajectory, an inductive approach was applied which allowed searching for patterns starting from the data and moving towards more abstract conceptualization and this resonates with Creswell (2014) and Dudovskiy (2020). Eight NGO leaders were randomly selected for key informant interviews to explore ethical leadership practices in the sector. Additionally, three key informants who were government official from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour & Social Welfare, representatives of funding partners and NANGO. These additional interviews were important for corroborating the views of the eight NGO leaders.

Presentation and Discussion of Study Findings

The leaders in the NGOs studied were asked to express their understanding of ethical leadership within the context of NGOs sector. From the data obtained, three aspects emerged which they believed form ethical leadership practice and these are values, moral competency and good conduct. This description of ethical leadership by the NGO leaders was corroborated by the key informants who expressed it using similar worlds like "Set of values" (K011) and "Code of conduct" (K03). The aspect of values is well expressed in the literature to mean knowing the things that are important in driving the purpose and aspirations of the organization with prejudice (Wulffers & Carmichael, 2020). The authors goes further to define values as "the universal guidance system of the soul" (Wulffers & Carmichael, 2020, p. 6). This definition indicates that values are expected to be ingrained in one's implicit and explicit being and doing. In addition, this suggests that leaders' personal values should converge with the organizational values as shown in Figure 1 below because a disconnect is likely to result in compromised leadership performance.
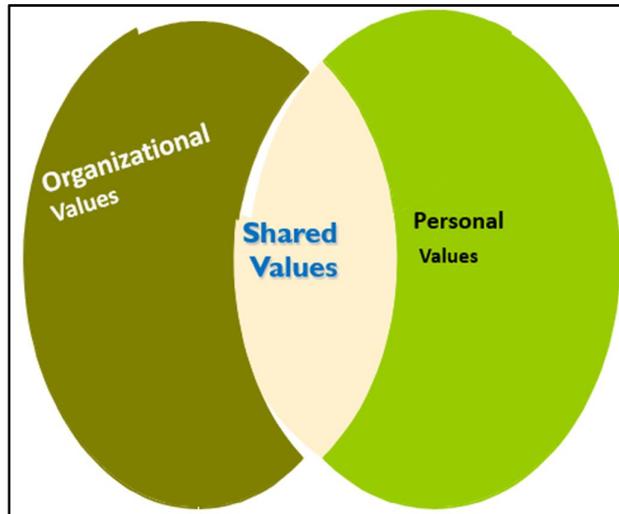
Figure 1: Convergence of values

The Figure 1 above illustrates that personal values of individuals in an organization including the leadership and management should converge with the organizational values. It is expected that when the the personal and organizational values have a convergence, over time the convergence increases thereby strengthening the stewardship dimension which is argued in this paper as requisite to ethical leadership practice.

From the interviews conducted, there was a common view from the NGO leaders and the key informants that leadership plays a key role in making sure that the desired organizational values are well understood and put into action. Furthermore, both categories of the study participants identified moral competence and good conduct of leaders as central to ethical leadership practice for the common good of organizations and society in general. A close examination of what the study participants meant when they said moral competence revealed that it encompasses integrity, professionalism and sound emotional intelligence. As Bachmann (2017) points out that a moral person is one who makes objective and fair decisions based on values and concern for others. This implies that values are pivotal building blocks in molding and propelling a leader into ethical leadership practice. Other key descriptions of ethical leadership practice that emerged from the interviews conducted were leader's ability to provide guidance and to role model in the organization and community.

Another crucial finding from the NGO leaders was that they viewed ethical leadership as comprising attributes of respect, honest, trustworthy, fairness, considerate of others and social inclusion. Waite (2020) asserts that ethics is the practical application of established morals, with morals being established notions of what is right or good. From this understanding, it can be seen that, generally, the NGO leaders associate ethics with morals. A close examination of the study findings,

revealed that upholding ethical leadership in the NGOs sector in Zimbabwe is not easy. For this reason, some study participants suggested that the NGOs should develop codes of ethics to guide leadership practice as well as everyone in the organization. This finding argues alongside Hodges and Howieson (2017) who posit that leaders' actions are based on the organizational leadership philosophy which include values-based ideas. To be intentional in guiding leaders for ethical leadership practice through some kind of ethical code is supported by Trevino and Nelson (2011) who assert that leadership rests on two pillars of the perception of the leader as a moral person and as a moral manager. The moral person component of ethical leadership illustrates how the leader is likely to behave in a given situation while the moral manager component encompasses the leader's transactional efforts to strongly convey expectations of ethical conduct among subordinates (Trevino & Nelson, 2011). Bachmann (2017) and Hartnett and Matan (2018) buttress the aspect of moral people and emphasize that these are individuals who display stable society compliant traits in their actions. Brown, Treviño, & Harrison (2005) affirm that the behaviour of the leadership in any organization should be understood from the perspective of values and moral competency.

While ethics are about norms and they specify how the leader's "ought" to behave (Ciulla, 2004), it should be pointed out that behaviours are the interface between people's internal and external worlds. Essentially, behaviour is an expression of internal factors such as one's identity, purpose, values, beliefs, and psychological state (Wulffers & Carmichael, 2020). Put together, it can be seen that ethical leadership is a complex socio-cultural tradjectory which requires one's conscious and deliberate effort. Brubaker (2013) acknowledges that the behavioural expression of ubuntu demonstrates compassion, dignity, respect, and a humanistic concern for relationships. On this aspect, the study found that participants expressed that NGO leaders should behave with integrity, honour and to lead by example. Arguably, this behavioural perspective links with other areas of leadership research like Jamnik (2011) who argues that the behaviour of superiors is the most important factor that contributes to the organization's ethical climate. This was also noted later by Let and Kant (2020) who observe that behaviours of superiors can actually be unethical, corrupt, unprocedural and unaccountable. This suggests that subordinates or followers in general should not blindly put into practice their leaders' behaviours but should discern to only practise the ethical ones. As the the study findings idicated, some of the unethical leadership practice in the NGOs sector include imposition of development projects on communities, community involvement exclusion in design of projects and ill-treatment of beneficiaries of projects. Clearly, this is quite unfortunate because the subordinates will also lead unethically. This speaks to the fact while NGO leaders are expected to be stewards (Hartnett & Matan, 2018), unethical behaviour by some of them hinders and dilutes their stewardship leadership practice in the delivery of humanitarian and development services to the communities. ubuntu is a worldview that holds promise for defining effective African leadership that counteracts the negative effects of corruption, discrimination, and scandals (Brubaker 2013).

Conclusions

This research sought to explore how ethical leadership in the selected NGOs is understood. Based on the findings presented, the study participants had a similar understanding of ethical leadership which encompasses ethical values, norms and moral principles that guide the right and wrong in the leadership practice. In essence, ethical leadership has three components, namely ethical values, moral competence and behaviour as sketeched in Figure 2 below.
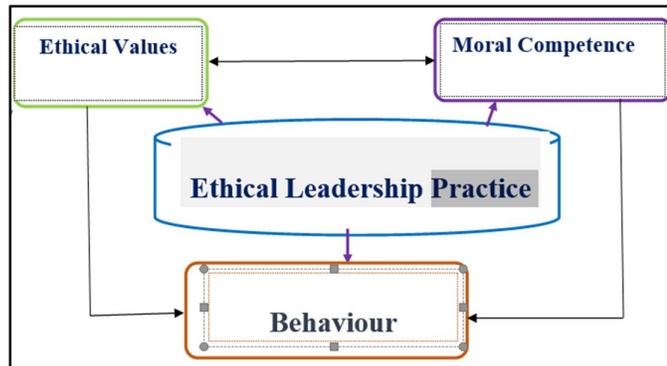
Figure 2: Key components of ethical leadership

In other words, it is quite clear from the study that an ethical leader is one who adheres to societal moral standard codes of respect, honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, knowing right and wrong, empathy and act in the common good of the community. From the findings presented and discussed, it can be concluded that ethical leadership is easy to understand conceptually but quite difficult to practise.

Recommendations

It is strongly recommended that NGOs should have explicit written codes of ethics to guide desired behaviour for ethical response to societal needs and problems. Policymakers or government agencies in charge of NGOs' registrations and their compliance to policies should strengthen enforcement of policy implementation and laws in the operations of civil society organizations. In the education sector, it is recommended that ethics be mainstreamed in every course/module for students' internalization and application in their leadership practice.

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