

Research Application Summary

**Strengthening African University leadership and management capacity for
economic transformation in Africa: My leadership and management experience
in the University (1976-to date)**

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Abstract

In this paper, the author show his personal experiences first in developing his leadership skills, and secondly, serving as a leader in various capacities. Key success factors include: being able to listen, flexible, and setting clear targets.

Key words: Leadership, management skills, Rwanda, targets

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit dans un premier temps ses expériences personnelles dans le développement de ses compétences en leadership, et ensuite, en tant que leader dans diverses capacités. Les principaux facteurs de réussite sont la capacité d'écoute, la flexibilité et la définition des objectifs clairs.

Mots clés: Leadership, compétences en gestion, Rwanda, objectifs

Below are some personal experiences and issues I consider important for strengthening leadership and management, not only in universities but also other institutions.

1. Some quotes:

This is how leadership was thought about by some academicians:

“Higher Education is facing more challenges than ever before, so it needs leaders who can motivate staff and ensure the sector remains relevant in a competitive global context. And for that to happen, we need clarity about what good leadership looks like”. Alison Johns (2016).

“Leadership is a personal commitment to make a difference in the lives of other leaders and their constituents” Lillas M. Brown (2001)

2. Experience in university leadership:

- (i) Head of Department and Dean of Faculty at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania;
- (ii) Founding Rector of the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), Rwanda;
- (iii) Rector of the National University of Rwanda (NUR), Rwanda;
- (iv) Vice-Chancellor of University of Kibungo (UNIK), Rwanda;
- (v) Minister of Education, Rwanda.

3. Practical tips for success in university leadership:

Without considering the order, the following are important practical tips that have guided my university leadership and management style:

Participatory approach. When I was a Head of Department in 1976, I was still young and without experience. I used to engage the Departmental staff in the management of department activities through weekly meetings. Thus, issues were discussed, plans made and evaluations carried out, which brought about results. This has continued throughout my university life.

Keeping records of decisions of meetings. It is essential to keep signed minutes for record. This comes in handy if questions are raised concerning certain decisions.

Transparency. I have been inspired by the Cabinet in Rwanda where decisions are made public on radio, newspapers and social media. In this way, students and staff must know decisions taken, and this prevents rumours and even potential strikes.

Openness. A policy of openness to people is worthwhile within the university. In this respect, the Vice-Chancellor is open to people who have issues on the one hand, and those who have proposals to contribute to the best of the university. A permanent consultative dialogue is worth keeping.

Communication. Effective communicating is the engine of good leadership. Various channels (newsletter, website, social media, group SMSs, meetings, etc.) with staff and students is helpful. For instance, I have been giving my telephone number, email, Twitter, Facebook, etc. to students and staff, and whenever there is a problem (exam, course, absence of a Lecturer), they immediately alert me for follow-up with concerned services.

Simplicity. Even though leadership positions appear to be on top, we should not behave to be above everybody, but be able to be approached by everybody (students, simple staff). This has helped me to know what is happening in the institution. If it is good, I have to keep it up and if it is bad, I have to take appropriate measures.

Flexibility. We know that the university is governed by rules and regulations. However, even though rules and regulations are in place, it is sometimes necessary to judge the situations before making a decision. I have always managed to have room for a certain flexibility where I consider specific situations, compare them to rules and regulations and then take

decisions. Besides, human beings are different from machines, and thus the way we treat them is far from automation.

Result-oriented. Whatever happens, results must be got and this is the utmost goal of a leader. Without results there is no progress. I have been ensuring that people are working for an outcome and they are provided with at least the minimum resources to achieve it.

Strategic planning and performance contracts. I have always focused to planning first with all that it involves (bottom-up process). Implementation has been through performance contracts at institutional level first and then individual level. Regular monitoring has been an important tool towards success.

Surround yourself with a few people who can deliver. It has been important to me to have some key people you may call upon to deliver certain key programs. It is a team of well committed and dedicated people who play the foremost role to make the university run. In that case, they pull others, motivate them and prompt their efforts.

Look for supporters, funders and sponsors. Resources (human, financial, material) are critical in the development of the university. In order to get them, we have to know what our supporters want and give it to them. Therefore, it is imperative to invest in writing proposals, negotiating, developing strong networks and partnerships. When you are backed by the government, it is easy but it is challenging when you are a private university.

Accept advice and criticism. It is true that ‘no person is an island’. Sometimes our decisions may be wrong, and we may commit mistakes as human beings. When it has happened, it is good to be advised and to accept criticisms to change.

Create positive environment for staff and students. Without students there is no university, and without staff the university may not run. Thus, staff and students are key stakeholders for the success of the university leader. It is compulsory to link with them through various ways (meetings, communications, feedback, representatives, etc) and to support them if required.

Challenges faced in leadership

There are challenges that hinder good leadership and challenge delivery at university. Among them, the following have been hard to me:

Resistance to change. People are always resistant to change; hence it is necessary to take time to explain to them the rationale behind your new ideas. Sometimes, you have to slow down a bit in order to be able to engage the whole university community in the new vision.

Staff retention. As a leader you invest in staff training and upgrading in order to have competent and standard staff. However, sometimes they leave the university without achieving

the expected outcomes. In this case, you are always in an endless circle of training staff that go away, but you may not abandon these efforts, you have to continue for the sustainability of the university.

Resources mobilisation (especially in private universities). Resources mobilisation is easy when you are backed by the Government, but very challenging when you are a private university.

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