

The Impact of Value Systems on the Development of Effective Leadership

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the role of values-based leadership and its contribution in enhancing leadership ability. This study also aimed to address why individuals in leadership positions fail to lead according to their own personal values and how this influences decision-making. A qualitative research approach and purposive sampling was employed. Data were collected through 15 semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used for analysing the data. The findings were that value systems have an impact on how a leader deals with problems in the different situations that arise within the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

Key words: Ethical leadership, values, leadership, qualitative research, thematic analysis, situations

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges in the study of leadership is that there is a gap in the theory of identifying values as being the foundation of leadership. Lord and Brown (2001) shared the same view saying that little attention has been paid to values-based leadership to embed the understanding that value systems are the intervention needed by leaders to influence their followers and improve employee and organisational performance. Instead much of the research has focused on the relationship between a leader's behaviour and the organisation's performance. It is thus evident that some organisations focus on the leader being able to deliver on the company's strategy/objectives. But what is not taken into consideration is that a leader should possess certain competencies to enable them to lead other people towards the shared goal/purpose.

The introduction of values-based leadership can help individuals in leadership positions find out which values they subscribe to and how these values influence their behaviour and the decisions they make in their personal lives and careers. It is important to highlight the benefits of values-based leadership for leaders, employees and the organisation and the impact it has on leadership ability. Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002) identified values and ethics as being necessary for the long-term survival of organisations because they are at the core of organisational behaviour and leadership which enhances the organisation's culture.

The organisation is in the motor industry and is based in Durban, South Africa. The identity of the

organisation cannot be revealed due to confidentiality agreements. It demands that employees meet the deadlines set out by its clients. The company is international with a head office in Europe and supplies the global automotive industry with various products such as engine systems and components, filtration and engine peripherals and thermal management and motor condensers. A great deal of production takes place daily and quality is of utmost importance within the organisation which puts pressure on leaders to become more task driven and to ensure that production takes priority. This has brought about a significant challenge because the organisation takes its values very seriously which are based on people orientation.

The organisation believes that people are their most important resource and that they should be happy at work, although they are required to ensure they produce quality products. The company requested the organisational development department to conduct a climate survey to get feedback on whether the leaders are living the values of the organisation. The climate survey was conducted using questionnaires distributed to all the employees. Most responses revealed that the employees within the organisation feel aggrieved as they believe its leaders care more about production and meeting the agreed client service levels, than living the values of the company which are centered around value systems like being people oriented, results oriented, respectful and in excellence, innovation and accountability. The leaders were also accused by employees of not being consistent in their leadership which is contradictory to the values of the organisation. The organisation believes that values

create the culture of the company and how things are done within the organisation. The expectation from employees of senior leadership is that they should lead by example and be seen to be living the values of the organisation. However, there is a challenge between balancing the performance of the organisation and the leaders living up to the stated values. The climate survey results were analysed and reported back to the senior leadership of the organisation.

An analysis was compiled from the results of the survey. The themes that arose were mistrust between employees and their leaders, leaders needed more development on how to lead others, favouritism, unfair processes, bias in benefits and incentives, racism and dictatorship. Feedback was given to each leader so that they could reflect on it and give their views. Following the survey, senior leadership intervened by giving each leader an opportunity to enroll in a management development programme to develop skills to equip them to lead more effectively and to change the perceptions of the employees regarding their leadership ability. This intervention was made because the industry that the organisation operates in relies on the skills of employees, hence the employees have to remain committed to their work. This requires employees to be led effectively so that they strive to perform better. The unhappiness of the employees creates a risk from a business perspective because if employees are not happy with their leaders, it negatively affects their performance at work. The organisation has also signed service-level agreements with their clients which are dependent on how the employees perform at work.

Leadership writers and theorists have increasingly described values as a key component of effective leadership. A common theme is that leaders should possess a strong foundation of personal values, principles or ethics to lead others effectively and to develop strong relationships with employees. Graber and Kilpatrick (2008) found that the values of a leader should reflect and be in-line with the organisation's values which should be accepted by other members of the organisation. One of the most important aspects of leadership theory should focus on is understanding from a human development aspect the implementation of value systems and the effect they have on individuals personally. Krishnan (2001) found that the value systems a leader shares with their followers are defined as the similarities between that leader's personal values and those of his followers.

Vogel (2012) found that a leader's system of values or deeply held beliefs form the ethical framework from which they develop a vision, define and shape the change process and take action to make their vision a reality. Therefore, values can play a major role in giving strategic direction to both the organisation and employees.

Values-based leadership can be used to build credibility and trust between a leader and an employee which encourages leaders to make decisions that are ethical. If employees feel they can trust their leader, the leader's value system motivates them to communicate the organisation's mission and goals (Messick and Bazerman, 1996).

Mihelic *et al.* (2010) highlighted that throughout history values have sparked the interest of many researchers in various sciences but not much has been done to acknowledge that values are important for effective leadership. They found that with the staggering growth of companies, management researchers have become interested in value systems but companies have not adopted values-based leadership as the cornerstone of every decision made in taking their organisations forward.

The values, belief systems, culture, shared vision and purpose of the organisation should develop leaders to clearly understand why they are part of the organisation (Anwar and Hasnu, 2013). The influence of value systems on leadership assists leaders to choose the right courses of action in the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

Graber and Kilpatrick (2008) asserted that the organisation's values are the key aspect that contributes meaningfully to the culture and ultimate success of the organisation's strategy. Buchko (2007) argued that the only way organisations can build brands for themselves in their respective industries is through their culture which emanates from the shared values that exist in the organisation; the culture of the organisation becomes a standard for its employees.

A common problem identified in organisations is that values and ethics are known but are not present in decision-making or prioritisations. Leaders can give ethical meaning to their decisions without the use of value systems in their decision making. Brown *et al.* (2005) defined ethical leadership as the demonstration or display of appropriate behaviour and conduct by an individual's actions and decisions in leadership positions.

The aim was to examine the role played by value systems in leadership and the impact that values have on individuals and organisations in terms of improving leadership ability and organisational culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative approach was used to conduct the study. All the objectives were met by the use of descriptive research to gather data that was accurate and detailed to be obtained. Ethical clearance was obtained before commencing the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and themes were created. All respondents completed informed consent forms which

were explained to all participants. Interview questions were constructed based on the topics covered in the literature review. The interview questions were semi-structured which allowed flexibility to probe more from the answers given by participants.

Purposive sampling was used in this study. The participants were purposely selected and interviews were conducted with leaders to get the necessary data from the targeted sample. Fifteen leaders (one general manager of production and manufacturing, HR executive, one manager from tube production, one manager from logistics, one head of Department from Quality Assurance, two managers from finance, one finance executive, one manager from information technology, one Head of Department from Engineering, one manager from maintenance, one manager from the service centre, two managers from engine cooling, one Head of Department from Production and Manufacturing) in the organisation were selected based on their positions, availability and different departments. The respondents participated in interviews and gave their views and perspectives. The interviews were done on the premises of the organisation in the various departments where the participants were based; they took about 45 min each in July 2014. Interviews were digitally recorded to capture the data as accurately as possible and to facilitate transcription for data analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The main themes that emerged are presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme one; importance of value systems: Value systems were found to be important as a guide giving direction to leaders in their daily lives. The responses indicated that leader's personal values reflect on how they lead others. There was a common view of why value systems are important to the participants individually which was that value systems define who a person is and what they stand for as an individual. "People are what their value systems are" (R1).

This is supported by Badaracco (1998) who found that the character of a leader is crucial for the individual to become an effective leader and their character is built or based on their own value systems that guide them in everything they do. The common responses from the participants were that value systems are greatly influenced by the belief systems of an individual and those beliefs translate into how an individual behaves. "I think value systems are important

as a guide in the way that you lead your life. I think without value systems you are probably like a ship without a captain" (R2).

The findings correspond to Henderson and Thomson (2003) who stated that values influence an individual's personality and that the values that individuals adopt are a result of their preferences. Gerhart (2008) substantiated the view that values are the beliefs that express what is dear to an individual and the things an individual chooses to represent.

Theme two; leading with integrity: Value systems set the tone for the organisation in the way that they do things and how the organisation builds trust and integrity throughout and in the way it promotes consistency in implementing strategies aligned to its values.

"From a business perspective I think your employees need to know who you are and what you stand for. Without them knowing that they wouldn't know what they are working for and what the objectives of the company are from a social aspect and from an economical aspect. They want to know exactly where they stand and I believe your value system is important for letting your employees know exactly what you as a leader stand for, so that, your subordinates have a reference point on how they should behave within the organisation" (R1).

Daft (2008) stated that integrity challenges leadership within the organisation to act in accordance with their moral principles which assists leaders to become consistent in everything they do and to gain trust from their employees. Henderson and Thomson (2003) supported the views of the participants that value systems become the DNA of the organisation which embeds the codes of how things are done and why things happen in a certain way.

Theme three; moral leadership: It was found that value systems are instilled at an early stage in one's life and therefore, they are what guide individuals to make moral decisions.

"Each of us is brought up with a certain value system of morals and if, we did not have such a value system it would be quite difficult to relate to other people to work with them and to explain certain things. If you are a manager it would be difficult to direct colleagues" (R6).

Brown *et al.* (2005) found that it is the responsibility of a leader to continuously evaluate whether or not they live according to the value systems they have been taught, since as people get older, their priorities change

and so, do their value systems. Pollard (2005) supported the view that leadership assists with the development of moral communities that influence human character and behaviour guided by values-rather than having rules that bring about strict standards and policies.

Theme four; the impact of spiritual beliefs on values-based leadership: Most participants shared the view that their value systems are influenced and based on their spiritual beliefs-regardless of the differences in religious dominations. "I am a Christian and my value systems are based on my beliefs" (R8).

Striepe *et al.* (2014) corroborated the view that spiritual leadership has a tremendous impact on values-driven leaders, who are greatly influenced by value systems such as serving others, trust, respect, support and empowerment. It was established that value systems form the basis of a leader's spiritual beliefs and those beliefs are what influence a leader to know the difference between right and wrong.

Theme five; the trait approach in leadership: There was a view that leaders need to possess certain characteristics that can only be entrenched by having good value systems that others can identify with.

"There are numerous traits or characteristics that need to be obtained and one can only achieve that by having good value systems" (R10).

Arvey *et al.* (2007) found a common thread amongst the responses given by all participants when they identified which values each leader considers to be important. It was emphasised there are certain characteristics that leaders need to display because they are expected to have good values. It was established that there are traits that the leaders are expected to display in their leadership styles such as honesty, trust and integrity.

Theme six; impact of value systems on followers: It was found that value systems play a profound role in developing effective leadership. When leaders live by their values their actions inspire the people that surround them which builds relationships between them and their employees. "If I display honesty or trustworthiness or something of that sort, people will follow that" (R2).

Daft (2008) stated that effective leadership is achieved by having leaders who are guided by value systems that encourage employees to follow a leader and this helps influence employees to do what is required. "I think if you look at some of the strong leaders

in the world today, they lead by a clear set of personal values and what they expect for themselves they expect for the people that they lead" (R14).

Brewer and Gardner (1996) supported the view that the values that leaders adopt will be visible to their subordinates and they automatically influence others to subscribe to the values of the leader. Those around the leader will aspire to be like them and a relationship develops where the leader's subordinates choose to follow and serve the leader.

Theme seven; the role of value systems in developing effective leadership: Value systems were identified by the participants as being the core foundation for leaders to become effective in the organisations and amongst the individuals they lead. "Values are an essential component for ensuring good leadership" (R6).

Dean (2008) considered that value systems have an important role to play in developing effective leadership because within the organisation, values assist the leader to do the right thing for the right reasons and guides leaders to not compromise on the core principles of the organisation.

Theme eight; emotional intelligence: Value systems assist leaders to lead their subordinates with emotional intelligence because their values are able to guide them to self-reflect on how to deal with situations. It was established that a leader that relies on their values will likely be aware of how they do things and react in certain situations therefore, they will likely be emotionally intelligent.

"You need to understand yourself and your emotions as a leader why you do certain things, so that, we can fix it if there is something wrong. A programme has started with the company on equipping leaders to become emotionally intelligent so that, they can lead effectively. So, what we are doing is we are having a work group so that, people on the shop floor have time to meet and discuss what is happening on the shop floor if they are happy in terms of the decision making, suggestions, improvements and that type of thing. So, yes, absolutely, values have a huge impact on leadership" (R4).

Theme nine; the role of value systems in ethical decision making: A participant shared the view that ethical leaders are judged by the decisions they have to make within the organisation which give them credibility. One participant further explained why values are important for leaders when they have to make ethical

decisions. “Definitely values influence decisions made by the leader because leadership is not just about getting people to like you, leadership also adds to the business environment essentially what the business is about. There are financial decisions that you need to make and strategic decisions you need to make that will also invite you to rely on your own values to make those decisions. So, if you do it with a value system where everything is above board, everything is clear, then your values definitely help. If I say one thing to you but do another thing this is definitely not going to work” (R5). “Values definitely influence your leadership style to make ethical decisions” (R1).

It was established that leaders that use their values to lead others will make decisions based on their values which will lead to leaders wanting to make ethical decisions. April *et al.* (2010) stated that value systems are very important to build credibility and unity within the organisation and for employees to have faith in the decisions made by senior management.

Theme ten; situational leadership: It was established that value systems become a leader’s point of reference-even when a leader has to make a quick decision or handle difficult situations.

“I think values influence decisions and values influence how I make decisions and what judgments I make and what calls I make as a leader; the decisions that we make are guided by our values. The foundation for our decision making comes from our values. So, while I wouldn’t deliberately go back through my decisions and say you know how this fits with our values, it’s something that is inherent to us in decision making” (R3).

Day *et al.* (2001) stated that values adopted by the organisation should be morally based so that, they can influence leaders to make ethical decisions. Krishnan (2001) supported the view that value systems are important to guide a leader to make decisions quicker in any situation and emphasised that a leader needs to be guided by strong value systems to make difficult decisions in situations where decision making is needed.

Theme eleven; organisational culture: It was established that the values of the organisation become its culture because they give direction to senior leadership on how things should be done.

“I think value systems are important because they guide the culture of the organisation. The culture is who, we are and how we do things. The value system that we have the values that we have as an organisation are the

foundation of the culture. They define the culture and the culture is what we do and who we are and how we do things. Every organisation has got a very unique and distinct culture; so, therefore making sure that the value system is in place and that the values are defined is really important for an organisation” (R11).

“I think value systems set the tone for what the company is about. It is a common thread for employees of do’s and don’ts which become the culture of the organisation” (R10).

Schein (2010) found that leaders at all levels of the organisation can influence on the basis of how the leader builds the organisational culture by influencing behavioural norms, policies and standards of employees. However, this can only be achieved if the leaders are clear about the values of the organisation. Leaders within the organisation should investigate the perceptions that employees have of the organisation they work for and the values the organisation has adopted to determine whether employees believe in the values of the company which influence organisational culture (Thomas and Lindsay, 2003). Graber and Kilpatrick (2008) corroborated the view that the organisation’s values are the key aspects that contribute meaningfully to the culture and ultimate success of the organisation’s strategy.

Theme twelve; leadership accountability: A participant shared the view that everyone within the organisation is accountable for ensuring that values-based leadership is promoted. It is the responsibility of every individual that joins an organisation to ensure that the organisation’s values are aligned to their personal values so that, that individual does not encounter personal conflict during their employment because that will create unhappiness within the organisation. A few participants emphasised that values-based leadership can be developed from an early stage in childhood if institutions such as schools, universities and churches take accountability for instilling the right values in individuals in the early stages. Another participant explained that the organisation’s values that create the values-based culture should be owned by everyone within the organisation.

“I think every leader has to be accountable and differentiate between normal leadership quality versus the influence of your values” (R3).

Dacey (2008) supported this view, saying that a person has the obligation to apply their personal values when they enter the organisation and needs to be comfortable for their values to be assessed so, the organisation can determine whether the person fits into the organisation. Abdullah *et al.* (2012) stated that the values of an individual are developed from within the

individual before they translate to the outside and impact on the organisation. It was found that value systems allow leaders to become accountable in their organisations and teams.

Theme thirteen; leading by example: If an individual does not relate or subscribe to the values of the organisation, they are unlikely to be happy and that same energy will be transferred to their subordinates. This is why is it important that when an individual joins an organisation, their own values need to be aligned with those of the organisation.

“I think honesty is critically important for me. I think being able to lead by example is important. The question of having integrity is important to me. I think those are probably the key ones. Well I think when one looks at how one wants to conduct one’s life, it’s important to base your life and the way you work on certain values and live by those values and be seen to be living by those” (R1).

Chandrakumara (2011) shared the view that values have a profound impact on the leadership within the organisation because they help leaders identify future behaviours that the employees may portray which may have an effect on the organisation. This view was supported by Reilly and Ehlinger (2007) who found that individuals who practice values-based leadership are those who lead by example and display ethical behaviour within the organisation having the ability to strike a balance between the principles of what is right or wrong. It was established that values systems assist individuals in leadership positions to lead by example because their value systems become evident in their actions.

Theme fourteen; team leadership: It was found that value systems help leaders achieve cooperation from their teams because of the characteristics the leader displays to their teams.

“A leader cannot influence their teams if they lead without value systems that guide them and those value systems become the path that a leader follows, hence the leader’s decisions must be influenced by their value systems. Values are like a lighthouse that provides light for you even if you are in rocky waters and it guides you to make the right decisions and choices” (R2).

Chandrakumara (2007) argued that if the leaders of the organisation represent the values of the organisation, it is more likely their teams will subscribe to the same values which will contribute to creating a level of high performance.

Theme fifteen; communication: The role of communication of values was emphasised by respondents. “You need to have a value system that

drives and guides the culture; so, you need to make it part of your organisation’s management system and there has to be values that are clearly defined. Those values need to be communicated and reinforced” (R5).

Darling and Beebe (2007) stated that values are meaningless if they are communicated but not expressed through actions. This view is supported by Daft (2008), who found that leadership communication is more effective if it is done through effective communication channels such as team meetings, conferences and information sessions.

Theme sixteen; value systems distinguish leaders from managers: Differences between leadership and management came to the fore.

“I have always seen it as a leader who puts the ladder on the correct wall and a manager makes sure that his team climbs it at a certain pace but the leader gives directions, strategic directions as to which wall where to go and the leader is inspiring and motivating, it’s not about the bottom line. The leader sort of sets the direction like a compass needle” (R4).

Lichtenstein (2012) argued that what differentiates a leader from a manager is that leaders use their value systems to make decisions that motivate and inspire the employees to create a culture that works towards building the organisation to increase productivity and become a success.

Figure 1 indicates that value systems have a profound impact on individuals because the value systems of an individual become their character which is seen in everything that the leader does. The character of

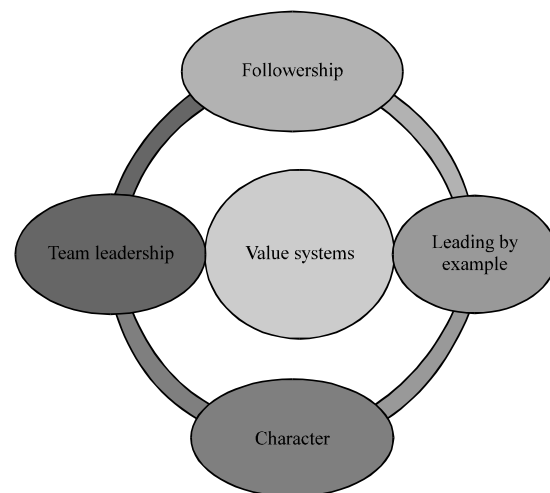


Fig. 1: Conceptual model of the impact that value systems have on individuals and the organization. Constructed based on analysis of the data

a leader is defined by the choices and decisions they make which are influenced by strong value systems. Value systems allow leaders to lead their teams effectively because their teams are a reflection of their ability to lead. If the leader's values are seen through the actions of the leader, it is likely that the leader's team and fellow colleagues will aspire to be like the leader which in turn builds the character of the leader.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that value systems have a huge impact in terms of nurturing people to become leaders who then inspire and influence employees to become leaders that others can follow. The study established how leaders can lead effective teams using their value systems as a guideline. The research topic is under-researched in South Africa and can thus be used as a reference for other organisations to develop effective leaders and organisations. Values-based leadership, if practised with a sense of accountability and integrity can increase productivity and create a culture that is transparent and open. It was established that value systems guide leaders in the organisation concerned to acquire personal values that influence their teams and others within the organisation. The values of the leader become the point of reference for their followers to behave in the same manner.

The responses indicated that the teams of leaders become a mirror for their subordinates; thus, the values of the leader create a culture of how things are done. Some responses indicated that value systems have a profound impact on the organisation's effectiveness because value systems are what define the organisation and they outline the expectations of senior leadership for the rest of the organisation. The leaders then become aligned to the values of the organisation and start actioning them. It was established that value systems form the culture of the organisation because the leaders of the organisation make ethical decisions guided by the principles of what the organisation stands for and what differentiates them from competitors.

It was highlighted that value systems assist leaders to make ethical decisions, since those decisions stem from the leader's personal values which direct them in everything they do. It was established that value systems are the core beliefs that an individual upholds in their daily lives. Therefore a leader will make reference to their values when making decisions. Value systems were discovered to be the guidelines that determine what a leader perceives as being right or wrong. Participants

acknowledged that value systems are what make up the essence of how leaders perceive their surroundings and how they react to situations even when faced with making difficult decisions.

LIMITATIONS

Availability of respondents was a limitation in the study as the organisation is performance driven and the day-to-day operations do not allow for leaders to be away from their work for long periods of time; production is the core of the business and employees need to be supervised. Time constraints were also a limitation, since some interviews had to be rescheduled because of long strategy sessions that were happening at the same time and most leaders had to be on-site during operations to make sure that production was being done according to quality standards. Employee's to employee's on the subject fell outside the scope of the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research can focus on the perspectives of employees on values-based leadership and its impact on them as followers. Future research can also highlight how value systems can impact on the performance of an organisation to achieve its profit targets. This study was conducted using qualitative methodology, however, a follow up quantitative study could be undertaken to determine the attitudes of followers on the impact of value systems in leadership. A comparison of values-based leadership and other leadership styles could be explored using a quantitative approach.

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