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Academic leadership and decision-making in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe: Trends and tribulations

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Orientation: The global technological and sociopolitical transformations sweeping across tertiary institutions demand dynamic, proactive and creative leaders who are capable of harnessing the various leadership and decisional skills the diversified experts possess through shared governance.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that academic leaders are endowed with leadership and decision-making skills and use a preferred situational style or model to attain organisational goals.

Motivation for the study: Tertiary institutions demand transformational leaders endowed with appropriate decisional skills and a participative culture for the attainment of organisational goals with the ultimate aim of achieving world-class standards in their volatile environments.

Research approach/design and method: Pragmatism informed the mixed methods approach (MMA) utilised. Qualitative data was generated from 10 purposely selected participants using open-ended questions of a case study design, while quantitative data was gathered from 58 systematically sampled respondents using a cross-sectional questionnaire survey. Samples were limited by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Main findings: The study revealed that the institutional leaders investigated preferred the transformational leadership style used in conjunction with the rational and creative decision-making models because they were found to be participative, innovative and compatible with the Ministry's Education 5.0 policy. An eclectic approach was equally suggested.

Practical/managerial implications: Shared governance and collective responsibility were suggested in conceiving strategic plans as effective leadership and decision-making skills are not confined to a single individual.

Contribution/value-add: Managerial leadership in tertiary institutions must devolve power and flatten the organogram if leadership and decisional skills possessed by followers are to be tapped.

Keywords: creative; laissez-faire; rational; transformational; transactional.

Introduction

Trends to address the social demand and universalisation of basic education in post-independence Zimbabwe have inevitably propelled the phenomenal expansion of higher and tertiary education provision and the number of institutions (Ngwenya, 2020; Zvobgo, 2004) linked to globalisation of markets and internationalisation (Black, 2015). The resultant increase in the diversity of student and staff credentials thus calls for proactive and effective leadership and decision-making skills for institutions to achieve world-class standards of excellence, particularly in turbulent environments (AIOqla, 2021). Within this context, effective leadership and decision-making processes enhance the attainment of an organisation's strategic goals, vision and mission (Faraci, Lock, & Wheeler, 2013). In the evolution of leadership theories over time (Black, 2015), decision-making is not only regarded as an indispensable ingredient of organisational success but its lowest common denominator (State University of New York [SUNY], 2009). Leadership behaviour is thus made synonymous with decision-making, the bedrock of leadership behaviour (SUNY, 2009). Against this background, this study sought to investigate the trends and tribulations of academic leadership and decision-making in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning.

Orientation

Historically, leadership has been associated with heredity and the heroic accomplishments of individuals based on 'unscientific' personal traits, according to social scientists (Bogenschneider, 2016). Nevertheless, successful leaders such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela arose in times of need due to situational variables prevailing at their time (Khan, Nawaz, & Khan, 2016). Their heroic accomplishments were based on describable behaviour. However, the historical fall of significant leaders such as Hitler (Khan et al., 2016) made Fiedler (1972, p. 26) argue that leadership cannot be confined to an individual's heroic acts and traits alone, but it can be shaped by 'managerial rotation to provide leaders with a base of experience on which to draw'.

Bush and West-Burnham (1994, p. 56) opine that leadership 'is not necessarily confined to one person in an organisation, nor is there one style of leadership', while SUNY (2009) argues that there is no one-size-fits-all decision-making model suitable for tertiary institutions of diverse staff composition. Consequently, because leadership and decision-making processes run parallel in a leader's organisational activities, both skills could be learned (Durai, 2015). Effective deployment of the skills would require a person with a combination of personal traits and training, and where not possible, a shared responsibility must be brought to the fore (Burleigh, 2020).

While Owens (1996) and Fiedler (1972) concur that a leader in one situation may not necessarily be so in another, SUNY (2009) does not view decision-making as a neat, symmetrical and mental activity that rests on a definite knowledge base. Different leadership and decision-making skills are needed in different situations, because both are determined by several situational variables such as the type of the institution, its size, the nature of the problem at hand, work experience, maturity, convictions, principles and staff expertise (AIOqla, 2021; Musundire, 2015). Therefore, leadership and decision-making values in tertiary institutions call for participative cultures and collegial leader–follower relationships, with emphasis on collective responsibility and a common mission to exploit the potentials of both parties (Jomah, 2017). Such a leadership and decision-making thrust would not only shape the management structures but inspire followers, enabling them to be organic and innovative for their success and development (Kumar & Gautam, 2018).

Besides, behavioural and contingent theories demand that effective leadership and decision-making make one cognisant of one's expertise and not traits (Stoner, Freeman, & Gilbert, 2008). Such consideration enables managerial leaders to identify transformative leadership capabilities among their followers and delegate the bases of managerial powers (e.g. legitimacy) to incumbents, enabling institutions to respond to technological, pedagogical innovations and be accessible to key segments of the population (Portugal, 2006). This would not only guide the followers but nurture an environment of trust, empowerment and encouragement to rise above their self-interests for the sake of the organisation (Jomah, 2017). Consequently, such organisations stand to realise increased productivity and enriched employees' interpersonal relationships (Faraci et al., 2013).

Zimbabwean state universities' vice chancellors are appointed by the president or chancellor following the recommendations of university councils. In private entities, the responsible authorities appoint both a chancellor and a vice chancellor. These top institutional leaders are often chosen using the 'best among equals criteria', an inappropriate consideration nowadays as university leadership and decision-making demand a myriad of skills (Amey, 2010). Such appointees may be good planners but evidently lack decisional and motivational skills to inspire enthusiasm and devotion in their followers (Jomah, 2017; Lunenburg, 2010). Little wonder that modern tertiary institutions put a high premium on leaders with sound leadership and decision-making skills who can attract funding, sponsorship, gifted learners and quality staff, ultimately outdoing their competitors and earning a reputation and prestige for themselves (Loveren, 2007; Portugal, 2006).

Managerial leadership and decision-making skills steer institutions towards achieving corporate objectives (Jomah, 2017), epitomising the situational leadership continuum between task-oriented and people-centred functions, and evoking shared responsibilities between leader and follower (Bass, 2008). However, where a leader may not possess both qualities, shared leadership may be practised. For example, a formal leader may perform task-related functions while the informal one focuses on group maintenance functions to avert a leadership crisis in any given institution (Stoner et al., 2008). Despite such efforts, studies in the United States of America have proven that task-oriented leaders make unilateral decisions embracing coercion, while the people-centred ones emphasise involvement to improve performance (Stoner et al., 2008). The preference of the latter approach to leadership and decision-making has averted grievances and high turnover rates in organisations, while the former is counterproductive (Stoner et al., 2008), making leadership and decision-making a daunting task even to the most accomplished leader (Namubiru, Onen, & Oonyu, 2017).

Universally, universities espouse freedom of choice, intellectual pursuits and, more recently, diversity (Portugal, 2006). A decentralised system of governance allows collective decision-making, often termed 'shared governance' (Lunenburg, 2010), giving academic staff their preferred autonomy which accommodates traditional rituals and duties (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Autonomous institutions embrace high-quality interpersonal relationships because they 'have high levels of expertise in their particular fields who can be passionate about issues and tasks in which they have a professional interest or stake' (Latchem & Hanna, 2001, p. 279). Such an approach enables managerial leadership to identify individual faculty passions and then draw upon them to foster a sense of organisational citizenship and

transformative collaboration (Lunenburg, 2010). Similarly, university leaders must be prepared to listen and learn from their followers who equally qualify to be leaders by adopting fellowship qualities (Portugal, 2006). However, interpersonal competition by area of specialisation, in pursuit of individual glory and rewards, should be heeded (Black, 2015).

Because most tertiary institutions have formal bureaucratic structures and systems of authority which guide managers' relations to their subordinates, their activities are further grouped according to departments and subdepartments (Owens, 1996). Within these structures and systems, effective communication should direct people's actions towards the attainment of goals and individual interests through shared understanding (AIOqla, 2021). Effective institutional communication is a predictor of the leadership and decision-making style or model academic leaders employ at any given time (AIOqla, 2021). This calls for an effective managerial leadership which coordinates the activities of the organisation with interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers through utilising appropriate communication skills meant to enhance effective decision-making skills (Kiplangat, 2017). Most importantly, situational leadership and decision-making recommend a supportive, flexible, participative and dynamic style instead of a static, prescriptive and authoritarian one (Iqbali, Akhtar, & Saleem, 2020). However, leaders need to be wary of situations demanding both styles or models of leadership and decision-making (Stoner et al., 2008). Fiedler (1972) urges leaders to either match the situation at hand or change it to suit their preferred style(s).

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of this study were:

- to demonstrate that tertiary institutions are made up of different professionals endowed with different potentials which need tapping, such that academic leadership and decision-making cannot be confined to a single individual
- to determine the type of leadership style and decision-making model academic leaders in tertiary institutions utilise in executing their leadership duties
- to establish the relationship between a preferred leadership style and a decision-making model adopted.

Literature review
Concept of leadership

Scholars are agreed that one's epistemological definition of leadership determines one's theoretical understanding of the concept and, more so, that leadership has no universally acceptable definition (Namubiru et al., 2017). Effective leadership in this regard would influence followers to perform as expected or beyond (AIOqla, 2021), and effective leaders are defined and distinguished by their decisional skills, because leadership is viewed as synonymous to decision-making (SUNY, 2009). Conceptualisation of the concept (leadership) and the subsequent discussion of the leadership styles enable one to visualise the symbiotic relationship between leadership and the decision-making process.

Bass (1990) views leadership as:

> An interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves structuring and restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of members … occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competences of others in the group. Any member of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership. (p. 19)

While Bass's definition seems to incorporate elements of the transactional and transformational leadership styles which are elaborated below, it also epitomises the perception adopted in this study that managerial leadership at tertiary level, in its attempt to motivate employees to perform as expected, cannot be confined to an individual (cf. Bush & West-Burnham, 1994; Fiedler, 1972; Portugal, 2006). On the other hand, Hersey and Blanchard (1996) and Phuthi and Mpofu (2021) view leadership as a process of influencing individuals or group activities to attain common goals. In essence, effective managerial leadership would entail directing and influencing the task-related activities of group members towards the attainment of organisational goals in an inspirational and motivational manner (Stoner et al., 2008).

Leadership styles

Effective leadership plays a pivotal role in the accomplishment of organisational goals (AIOqla, 2021). Because organisations are hierarchically and bureaucratically structured for their functionality, the leader's responsibility is to coordinate the activities of the followers for the purposes of attaining organisational goals using the appropriate leadership style(s) (Stoner et al., 2008). Managerial leadership in this context is determined by one's philosophical orientation (Black, 2015). Leaders who are task- or production-oriented are good at goal-setting, planning and organising while the human- or people-oriented ones focus on interpersonal relationships among their followers and achieve a position of personal acceptance to the exclusion of the task (Bush & West-Burnham, 1994). However, depending on the prevailing situational variables, both orientations may be adopted with adaptations. Such an exposition would demand effective leadership with effective decision-making skills (Luneburg, 2010) to decide between utilising a transactional, transformational, laissez-faire or eclectic leadership style to get the job done (Bass, 2008).

Transactional leadership style

According to Bush and West-Burnham (1994), transactional leadership is a functional or psychological contract between the leader and followers empowering the leader to accomplish performance objectives, complete given tasks, maintain current organisational situations, motivate followers through contractual agreements, direct behaviour of followers towards achievement of established goals, emphasise extrinsic rewards, avoid unnecessary risks and focus on

improving organisational efficiency (Jomah, 2017). In turn, it allows followers to fulfil their own self-interest, minimise workplace anxiety and concentrate on their organisational objectives such as increased production, quality customer service and reduced costs (McCleskey, 2014). The focus in this study is the leader's exchange with followers, as both parties are interested in the fruitful production of the educative enterprise (Bass, 2008). The fact that the leader determines what followers need to do to achieve objectives classifies these requirements and helps followers become confident in the process, but this makes it dictatorial in practice (Stoner et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the transactional leadership's production-oriented emphasis aligns it with Taylor's classical scientific management thought (Black, 2015). In Taylorism, followers were scientifically chosen and trained to produce high-quality goods in a hierarchically structured organisation, with bureaucratic systems put in place stipulating how tasks were to be executed in order to achieve organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Amey, 2010). Crucial decisions were made at the managerial level and cascaded to the followers in a top-down fashion (Amey, 2010). Command and control compelled the followers to perform assigned tasks according to stipulated standards, and the leader wielded considerable authority in the process (AIOqla, 2021). Moreover, leaders used coercion to compel followers to perform tasks according to their wishes (Owens, 1996). Both the leader and follower were held accountable for their decisions and actions respectively (Black, 2015). Followers who excelled were rewarded accordingly (Khan et al., 2016).

While transactional leadership in tertiary institutions may be suitable in situations requiring immediate action or prompt decisions without consultation or in a crisis (Bennet, Glatter, & Levacic, 1994), universities, employers of high levels of expertise in their specialist fields and administrative structures, loathe a command-and-control mindset (Black, 2015). Besides, when leaders become overly responsible, followers feel 'underutilised, over-controlled and ultimately uncommitted' (Keith & Girling, 1991, p. 64). Thus, the leadership theory construction that disregards situational and contextual factors related to organisational challenges would curtail and frustrate the academic freedom most academic staff yearn for (Black, 2015). Instead, an adaptive and open-sense leadership which minimises the 'us and them' mentality would be ideal (Black, 2015).

Transformational leadership style

According to Black (2015), transformational leadership is a 1970's behaviourist theory which sought to infuse a human-relation approach to organisational effectiveness. Transformational leaders use their personal vision and energy to inspire followers to perform as expected through involvement which promotes organisational effectiveness (Khan et al., 2016). Bass (2008) reiterates that such leaders aim to raise followers from lower-level needs to self-actualisation through idealised influence, inspirational motivation,

intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration with high psychological impact. The leaders' inspirational powers derived from attributes such as referent power, strong connection to righteousness and beliefs and the ability to convince others make them charismatic (McCleskey, 2014). Resultantly, it becomes easier for such leaders to communicate their visions to followers and capture their energy and commitment, inculcating confidence and high expectations in them (Northouse, 2016). Leaders who possess such attributes become drivers of change in organisations (Gronn, 2011). Besides, they are usually portrayed as heroes capable of transforming the loyalties and behaviours of the staff through a shared organisational culture (Black, 2015).

Because transformational leadership is inspirational and ostensibly people-centred, it resonates well with democratic principles of leadership (Gronn, 2011), ensuring that transformations entail the participation and persuasion of followers who must first change themselves for successful organisational change (Namubiru et al., 2017). This feat may be achieved through a group-centred approach with decentralised authority and decision-making powers under the influence of a delegated leader (Bennet et al., 1994). In that light, a formal leader would be required to mentor or coach capable followers in a flexible manner in pursuance of common goals and involve them in determining or planning the objectives, making decisions and executing activities so that both have a shared responsibility in their undertakings to evoke ownership and commitment (Khan et al., 2016). Most importantly, managerial leaders follow an open-door policy towards their followers by valuing their inputs in decision-making to develop a positive group spirit (Bennet et al., 1994).

While transactional leadership styles have previously dominated organisational leadership, current trends demonstrate that transformational leadership styles produce quality outcomes (Khan et al., 2016). However, the latter's major flaw is that over-participation, if improperly handled, may degenerate into conflicts and alienation (Davar, 1993). Moreover, being a recent phenomenon, transformational leadership's influence on organisations as a whole is not yet clear (Stoner et al., 2008), and furthermore, some university experts do need close supervision (Bennet et al., 1994).

Laissez-faire (free reign) leadership style

On a continuum, leadership styles range from transactional to laissez-faire, the pivot being transformational (Bennet et al., 1994). The laissez-faire leadership style is thus perceived as the opposite of the transactional one as it allows the 'let everyone do as they wish' philosophy reign in an organisation (Bennet et al., 1994), prompting Bass and Avolio (1990) to describe it as 'the absence of leadership'. While encouraging follower participation, it does not provide the direction or framework for constructive participation (Khan et al., 2016). Leadership in this context is practised by suggestion and delegation, with the formal leader remaining in the background, assuming that followers have all the experience, maturity and expertise

needed to execute whatever task is assigned to them and are intrinsically motivated to achieve (Al-Malki & Juan, 2018). Furthermore, the organisation has no vision or mission statement to direct the activities of the followers and planning lacks a strategic orientation. To make matters worse, no goals are set for followers, and problems are solved randomly by whoever is available (Khan et al., 2015). In the long run, followers must be self-motivated because they operate autonomously, and there is minimum leadership feedback on their performances (Ekmekci & Tosunnoglu, 2016). Resultantly, followers are frustrated by the formal leader's inactivity on leadership duties (Bass & Avolio, 1990). The successful completion of various tasks depends entirely on the inputs of the followers (Khan et al., 2016). While too much freedom of action associated with this leadership style might be found to be attractive to followers, as it allows them to be creative and innovative, if it is not checked by the formal leader, the organisation may lose direction; followers may fail to meet deadlines, leading to chaos and anarchy (Khan et al., 2016).

Concept of decision-making

Effective decision-making entails a deliberate, interactive thought process of making a best choice, informed by the best data, alternatives or ideas available within the limited resources about what future actions to pursue given a set of objectives (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012; Uzonwanne, 2016). Conclusions drawn from gathered intelligent data become learning experiences (Schoemaker & Russo, 2014). To achieve this, an effective leader utilises different decision-making models matching one's preferred leadership style depending on the prevailing situation. Noteworthy is that some problems may demand inaction (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012).

Models of decision-making

Decisions must be made regarding planning, coordination, execution, evaluation and leadership patterns in different operational departments (Salmi & Pham, 2019). Decision-making is deemed to be a social process that develops with time (Iqbali et al., 2020), and having a skilled decision-maker in an organisation is an indispensable ingredient for success (SUNY, 2009). Consequently, effective leaders seek to make effective decisions which enhance productivity and attainment of the organisational goals (Salmi & Pham, 2019), determined by one's philosophical orientation (Iqbali et al., 2020) and influencing how decisions made are successfully communicated to the followers (Loveren, 2007; Namubiru et al., 2017). For that reason, leaders must know when to make a decision, who to involve and the appropriate model to employ, as decisions made may either hinder or promote organisational performance (Jomah, 2017), and moreover, every individual in an organisation is affected by whatever decision is made and each reacts and responds as interest dictates (SUNY, 2009).

Rational decision-making model

According to Uzonwanne (2016, p. 2) the rational decision-making model (RDMM) can be defined as 'a method of systematically selecting among possible choices that are based on reason and facts'. Similarly, Bauer and Erdogan (2012, p. 52) describe the RDMM as 'a series of steps that decision makers should consider if their goal is to maximise the quality of their outcomes'. In this case, the leader or followers are using available facts and information to analyse the problem at hand, following prescribed procedures to make a decision (Uzonwanne, 2016). The proponents of the RDMM identified the following eight steps which may be utilised in the decision-making process:

1. Problem identification, definition and clarification.
2. Decision or solution criteria must be established. Potential options generated must be evaluated.
3. Weigh decision or solution criteria against the generated options.
4. Generate as many options as one can surrounding the gap established in number 3.
5. Evaluate the alternatives in terms of functionality, resources available and time.
6. Choose the best alternative.
7. Implement the decision chosen to solve the problem.
8. Evaluate the final outcome (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012; Uzonwanne, 2016).

The RDMM's major weakness is that it does not represent how all decisions are made in an organisation, because some decisions are programmed while others are nonprogrammed (Stoner et al., 2008). The former occur frequently enough and demand 'an automated response' while the latter 'require conscious thinking, information gathering and careful consideration of alternatives' (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012, p. 520). Above all, 'the generation of ideas may lead to analysis paralysis, a situation which arises when more time is spent on gathering information and pondering it without a decision being made' (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012, p. 521).

Bounded rational decision-making model

Although akin to the RDMM, Bauer and Erdogan (2012, p. 521) claim that this model arises where 'individuals knowingly limit their options to a manageable set and choose the first acceptable alternative without conducting an exhaustive search for alternatives'. Stoner et al. (2008) believe that coping with inadequate information about the nature of the problem and its possible solutions is better than being overwhelmed with information which one might not use or even remember. In that way, time and resources are saved. Turpin and Marais (2004) further opine that options are examined one at a time instead of examining all, the one arrived at is acceptable even if it is not the best. Similarly, Simon (in Stoner et al., 2008) a strong advocate for bounded rational decision-making model (BRDMM) posits that decision-makers *satisfice*, meaning that they accept the first satisfactory decision they uncover. The acceptance of the first alternative that meets the minimum threshold rather than searching for an alternative that produces the best results is its major flaw as it compromises the decision made (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012).

Intuitive decision-making model

The intuitive decision-making model (IDMM) does not require conscious reasoning, as most such decisions 'are made under challenging circumstances including time pressure, constraints, uncertainty, changing conditions and highly visible and high stakes outcomes' (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012, p. 521). It is adopted on the premise that when presented with problems, experts use their past experiences related to the current problem to make decisions buoyed by training and technical knowhow to arrive at a workable decision (Uzonwanne, 2016). The potential options are weighed against past experiences, tested mentally and, if not workable, are discarded until workable solutions are found (Uzonwanne, 2016). However, its major flaw is that one decision is considered at a time and heavily relies on past experience and training, which might be problematic to novice leaders (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012).

Creative decision-making model

The leader who intends to use the creative decision-making model (CDMM) must first flatten the hierarchical structure of the organisation to allow intense participation and competition among followers in the generation of new and imaginative ideas (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). Although creating new ideas through brainstorming or wildstorming is a costly exercise, Bauer and Erdogan (2012) argue that the cost is worthwhile when doing business in a healthy and competitive environment. Its five distinctive phases are as follows:

1. Problem recognition.
2. Immersion which involves consciously thinking about the problem and gathering data on it. This demands training or expertise on the area being investigated.
3. Illumination or insight moment, which involves musing over a solution to the problem into your mind until a solution is found.
4. Verifying the feasibility of the solution and application.
5. Implementation (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012, p. 529).

The CDMM's weakness is that creativity is determined by one's personality traits, attributes, situational context, experience, background and perspective (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). While group participation may enhance commitment and ownership of the decision at implementation because every individual will have invested time and energy in it, it may be time consuming and costly to prompt decisions which need immediate implementation. Furthermore, leaders who utilise the group approach must guard against outspoken members who might outshine passive ones during the brainstorming or wildstorming sessions (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012).

Research design
Research approach

The philosophical assumption underpinning the mixed methods approach (MMA) utilising the convergent parallel model adopted for this study was pragmatism (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017) in an attempt to answer the question: 'How does the academic leader's leadership style influence the decision-making process in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning?' The researchers believed that the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data would not only eliminate bias and weaknesses but neutralise the latter of each form of data in the attempt to resolve the phenomenon (Buchholtz, 2019). Besides, the 'between-methods triangulation' inherent in the MMA would enable researchers to triangulate their different viewpoints, data sources, methodology and theory (Salvador, 2016).

Research methods

Because both qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, it allowed contradictions to be explained and further electronically probed until saturation was achieved (Mohajan, 2018). The former utilised a case study design and the latter a cross-sectional survey. The case study allowed the researchers to develop a detailed view of the meaning of the phenomenon from the participants' views, while the survey results were meant to generalise from the sample to the population, boosting the full understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Funmilola & David, 2019).

Research participants and sampling methods

The study was concentrated in nine tertiary institutions located in the western part of Zimbabwe with an estimated population of $n = 200$. Ten participants judged to have rich qualitative data on the phenomenon were purposively selected and the sample was determined by saturation. In addition, 58 respondents responded to the quantitative questionnaire. The latter sample was far lower than expected, largely due to the reduced flexibility in movement during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown restrictions and the general apathy towards surveys by academic staff. Even the repeated visits and reminders ended in vain.

The sample comprised vice-chancellors, principal officers, deans, departmental chairs, director, college principals or vice-principals, heads of divisions or departments and registrars or assistant registrars. Their qualifications ranged from Higher National Diploma to PhDs and work experiences from 5 months to 22 years. It was the quality of participants and respondents which made the researchers proceed with the study, despite the low sample of the respondents. In addition, the use of both databases allowed member-checking of data generated and an in-depth analysis of each case over a period of 6 months (Samul, 2020).

Data collection instruments and data quality and integrity

Qualitative data was elicited from selected participants using an online semistructured open-ended questionnaire, while the quantitative portion used a closed-ended one in compliance with COVID-19 pandemic guidelines, with an option of

hardcopies for both instruments. The open-ended questionnaire comprised 17 items, an attached letter explaining the purpose of the study and soliciting for voluntary participation. Section A (q1–3) sought biographic data, and Section B (q4–10) explored the concept of leadership and decision-making, leadership and decision-making styles or models, preferred style(s) or model(s), challenges or opportunities encountered and additional comments on the phenomenon. In some instances, clues were given to enhance the understanding of the technical terms used. The quantitative questionnaire had 39 content items utilising a five-point Likert scale. Section A captured biographic data (q1–5); Section B, the concept of leadership (q6–10); Section C, the concept of decision-making (q11–15); Section D, leadership styles (q16–27); and Section E, models of decision-making (q28–39).

The open-ended responses allowed participants to freely express their views on the phenomenon while the fixed responses allowed researchers to statistically analyse the responses (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Both instruments were pilot tested on five nonparticipants before administration, which enhanced their trustworthiness and reduced validity and reliability errors (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Furthermore, the triangulation of data sources, methodology and investigators employed (Mohajan, 2018) enhanced the credibility of both databases (Tonkin-Crine et al., 2015).

Data analysis

Analysis and interpretation of the qualitative database followed the traditional thematic approach, which was relied upon to produce trustworthy and insightful findings, even when the process could have been judged subjective (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Thematic analysis typifies hermeneutic content analysis for interpreting non-numerical data, using pattern recognition to derive meaning and linking parts to the whole (Roberts, Dowell, & Nie, 2019). The quantitative database derived its interpretation and analysis through frequency tables and by means of a five-point Likert scale responses, together with a correlation test in response to objective 3.

Ethical considerations

Both ethical clearance and permission to conduct fieldwork in the research sites were sought from the Zimbabwe Open University (reference number ZQNSP/5/21) and the Secretary for the Ministry of Education (reference number REF/P) respectively. Permission was further sought from the heads of institutions before informed consent was sought from the targeted participants. Consenting parties were first informed of the risks associated with the research before they signed consent forms. They were also assured that their names and those of their institutions were going to be masked and data gathered was going to be reported anonymously. Confidentiality was guaranteed in the process as well, with an assurance that such data would be secured in encrypted files for a period of 5 years and used for academic purposes only. Thereafter the files would be deleted permanently from the laptop's hard drive and hard copies shredded.

Results

The results are discussed under the following headings: concept of leadership and decision-making, leadership styles, decision-making models, preferred style or model and challenges or opportunities.

Concept of leadership and decision making

Participants collectively perceived leadership as 'the ability to influence, guide, inspire or motivate followers and coordinate their activities towards the attainment of organisational goals'. Furthermore, the respondents admitted that their own leadership style influenced the performance of their followers (89.9% see Table 1). For that reason, 'power should be devolved to all levels of the hierarchy' to enable academic leaders to be 'accountable for their actions' (Participant H, I). This sentiment was also confirmed by 70.7% of the respondents. However, the mixed reactions of those who viewed leadership as an inborn trait (44.8%) and that it was confined to individuals (36.2%) are inconsistent with this study.

On the other hand, participants viewed decision-making as:

[A] process which entails making judgements or analysing several options from a basket of available ones informed by information gathered in order to solicit the best alternative to resolve an identified problem using a chosen model.

Similarly, the respondents viewed it as a process involving making choices among given alternatives (1.9 see Table 1), informed by the best available data (1.9) with conclusions being drawn based on the intelligent data gathered (2.0). However, they rejected inaction when a problem occurs (3.9) and a top-down decision-making model (3.8).

Arguably, the participants' dominant views on these concepts resonate with those expressed in this study.

TABLE 1: Concepts of leadership and decision-making (n = 58).

Questionnaire item		Perception rating (%)				Mean
		A	N	D	Total	
Leadership						
6	Is an inborn trait.	44.8	25.9	29.3	100	2.8
7	Is mainly through delegation.	70.7	13.8	15.5	100	2.3
8	Influences followers to attain set goals.	89.7	3.4	6.9	100	1.8
9	Is confined to individuals.	36.2	31	32.8	100	2.9
10	Demands different situational-leadership skills.	91.4	1.7	6.9	100	1.6
Decision-making involves						
11	Making choices among given alternatives.	82.8	5.2	12	100	1.9
12	Making choices informed by the best available data.	81.0	10.3	8.6	100	1.9
13	Conclusions based on adequate intelligent data.	72.4	13.8	10.4	100	2.0
14	Allowing issues to resolve themselves.	12.0	12.1	75.9	100	3.9
15	Managerial staff making all decisions.	15.5	10.0	72.4	100	3.8

A, agree; N, neutral; D, disagree.

Leadership styles

Transactional leadership style

Participant A summed it all up when she indicated that the style was 'applicable in situations where followers were unwilling to take an extra effort to finish an urgent assignment', although some loathed it because it 'bred hatred, disunity' and 'demeaned the staff'. In corroboration, Participants B, C, F, H and I used it mainly to 'monitor systems', 'set deadlines for students' feedback', 'implement ministerial policies such as performance management', 'give direct tasks or assignments which should be completed within set parameters', 'assign duties', 'reward achievers or reprimand failures in critical situations … under time constraints that do not allow debate'.

However, Participant G, who subscribed to the carrot-and-stick approach when engaging followers, was seemingly compelled by 'resource constraints' to use 'force' instead. In denial were Participants D and J, who claimed to utilise the 'command element' which they felt was 'inappropriate for academics', although they unconsciously made followers 'obey instructions'. Even the surveyed institutional leaders doubted its usability, although they admitted that in contractual engagements between the leader and followers, it was suitable (2.5 see Table 2).

Transformational leadership style

Five of the participants utilised this style 'when conceiving institutional or departmental strategic plans'. Such an effort demanded 'a visionary consensus-building approach' (Participant I) and 'active participation' from followers (Participants C, D, F, G, J). Perhaps all that was needed in such

TABLE 2: Leadership styles (*n* = 58).

Questionnaire item	Perception rating (%)				Mean
	A	N	D	Total	
a. Transactional leadership					
16 Uses command or control to motivate followers.	19.0	27.6	53.4	100	3.5
17 Is contractual agreement between leader and follower.	55.2	29.3	13.8	100	2.5
18 Rewards and punishes followers.	20.7	25.9	53.4	100	3.4
b. Transformational leadership					
19 Creates a shared vision, guides and inspires teams.	89.7	3.4	6.9	100	1.8
20 Creates a shared vision based on identified needs.	86.2	6.9	6.9	100	1.9
21 Guides teams towards unified goals.	91.4	1.7	6.9	100	1.8
c. Laissez-faire leadership style					
22 Relegates the leader to the background.	15.5	29.3	55.2	100	3.6
23 Is for mature and self-motivated individuals.	81.0	8.6	10.4	100	2.2
24 Promotes innovativeness.	41.4	24.1	34.5	100	3.0
d. Other style					
25 Uses all three leadership approaches.	82.8	5.2	12.1	100	2.0
26 Prefers a different style.	17.2	48.3	34.5	100	3.2
27 Changes according to the prevailing situation.	91.4	1.7	6.8	100	1.9

A, agree; N, neutral; D, disagree.

a scenario was 'role modelling' (Participant E), 'guidance, support, resources or motivation' (Participant J) and 'mentorship to upcoming leaders' (Participant D). Little wonder that Participants A and H further viewed it as 'autonomous' and a 'foundation to their leadership style', respectively. In consonance, 91.4% of the respondents guided their teams towards unified goals and through inspiration and motivation towards the attainment of unified goals (89.7%), thus creating a shared vision (86.2%). However, Participant B, perhaps ignorantly, found the style inappropriate.

Laissez-faire style

Participant A conveniently found the style appropriate for 'small-scale decisions demanding no authorisation from the superordinate'. In concurrence, Participants B, G, H, I and J collectively used it to 'delegate noncritical activities or tasks to followers' who possessed the 'expertise related to the job', particularly, 'departmental issues'. Furthermore, Participants G, I and the majority of respondents investigated (2.2.) quipped that 'mature and self-motivated followers thrived best in environments where autonomy and resources were guaranteed by the leadership'. On the contrary, Participants B, E and F used the style 'sparingly' because it was 'not effective for goal attainment' in their perception. Even the respondents investigated expressed mixed reactions on its 'innovativeness'.

Models of decision-making

The rational decision-making model

Participants unanimously agreed that when faced with challenges of whatever magnitude, they 'actively engaged subordinates in brainstorming sessions' aimed at generating 'several options' which they would 'assess against set benchmarks' before 'jointly choosing the best option for implementation'. Likewise, most respondents strongly contended (2.0, 2.1, 2.0; see Table 3). Furthermore, Participants G and I asserted that such functions could be 'delegated to academic leaders' as the RDMM is 'participant-driven' thereby enabling 'them to derive joy or satisfaction in creating footprints in organisational processes' (Participant B).

The bounded rational decision-making model

Generally, in the absence of a probe, the perceptions of the participants lacked clarity. Participant G 'vetted alternatives given', which she found 'divisive' without stating what followed thereafter. Using a combination of the BRDMM and the IDMM were Participants A, C, D, E and I, who used the former when 'dealing with emergencies' or 'were forced by circumstances to make *ad hoc* decisions on the spot, fully aware of the available options … to save time and avoid prolonged debates'. Confusing were those who used the BRDMM when 'acting upon some new policy guidelines' (Participants F, H) and those who did not (Participants B, J). In agreement was Participant H, who used the BRDMM when 'collaborating and having a staff meeting'. Overall, it appears the BRDMM was infrequently used, as testified by the respondents (3.6, 3.9, 3.2; see Table 3).

TABLE 3: Models of decision-making (*n* = 58).

Questionnaire item	Perception rating (%)				Mean
	A	N	D	Total	
a. RDMM					
28 Utilises conscious thinking to generate options.	89.7	1.7	6.8	100	2.0
29 Identifies and defines the solution clearly.	84.5	6.9	8.6	100	2.1
30 Generates options based on established decision criteria.	86.2	6.9	6.9	100	2.0
b. BRDMM					
31 Considers the first option.	15.5	22.4	60.4	100	3.6
32 Depends on inadequate information.	17.2	6.9	74.2	100	3.9
33 Examines one solution at a time.	36.2	20.7	41.4	100	3.2
c. IDMM					
34 Uses previous experience.	75.9	12.1	12	100	2.1
35 Requires training and technical knowhow.	63.8	19	17.2	100	2.5
36 Makes choices without much thinking.	10.3	6.9	82.8	100	4.1
d. CDMM					
37 Uses teams to generate ideas.	89.7	1.7	8.6	100	2.1
38 Needs training and expertise.	74.1	13.8	12.1	100	2.3
39 Needs adequate time.	55.2	29.3	15.5	100	2.6

A, agree; N, neutral; D, disagree; RDMM, rational decision-making model; BRDMM, bounded rational decision-making model; IDMM, intuitive decision-making model; CDMM, creative decision-making model.

Intuitive decision-making model

Most participants indicated that they used the IDMM when making 'prompt decisions' based on 'past experience' (75.9%) amid 'limited time' which would have 'set precedence by yielding positive results', thereby becoming 'a reference point' when dealing with 'recurring issues'. For that reason, knowledgeable users (63.8%) denied that it required some degree of thinking (82.8%).

Creative decision-making model

Most participants admitted that the CDMM was suitable when 'conceptualising strategic plans at both institutional and departmental level' by 'actively involving' followers 'to generate ideas' freely (2.1) in 'an experimental, innovative and creative manner' in sync with the Ministry's Education 5.0 policy. The latter thrust made Participants G and H liken it to the 'transformational leadership style' and 'some growth model' of some sort in any given institution respectively. However, the majority of respondents (2.6) agreed that followers needed adequate training and expertise in order to use the model to its maximum.

The relationship between preferred leadership style and decision-making model

Most participants preferred the transformational leadership style together with the RDMM and CDMM because the former embraced multiple stakeholders in a creative manner, and the latter resulted in 'comprehensive decisions'. A correlation test for the two yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.83 (RDMM) and 0.65 (CDMM) respectively, suggesting a very strong positive linear relationship between

participants' preferences for the transformational leadership style and RDMM against other alternatives proposed. Similarly, respondents preferred to adjust their leadership style depending on the prevailing situation (91.4% see Table 2) or using all the three styles interchangeably (82.8%). Also utilising the latter view were Participant C and I in decision-making, excluding the BRDMM which respondents least preferred (see Table 3). Equally unfavourably was the IDMM which subjected participants to 'prescribed standard operating procedures' (Participant A, C). Interestingly, Participant A claimed that the laissez-faire style 'allowed followers the freedom to accomplish tasks in the absence of the leader'.

Challenges or opportunities encountered

Generally, the purported transactional leaders were constrained by resources for rewarding goal achievers. Likewise, those who heavily relied on the top-down decision-making model ended up implementing 'wrong decisions', especially when 'systems from within were not sensitive' to grass-roots views and 'external forces' were at play. Similarly, 'shop-floor decisions lacked superordinate support', which resulted in 'role conflict' and 'divisions'. Most important was 'the lack of information' which resulted in 'decisions made being overtaken by events'. They, however, acknowledged that situations exposed to them presented leadership growth opportunities and chances for self-evaluation.

Discussion

The participants' understanding of the concept of leadership and decision-making and their expertise resonate well with the literature surveyed. Evidently, shared governance must be brought to the fore (cf Burleigh, 2020), with emphasis on devolution if the potentials of the diversified academic leaders would be exploited to the maximum, because academic leadership cannot be monopolised. Such a thrust would develop a participative culture and collegial relationship between leaders and followers with emphasis on collective responsibility and common mission (Jomah, 2017). In turn, managerial leadership should facilitate a unified front by effectively coordinating the activities of the different departments.

Because the argument advanced in this study is that leadership and decision-making are synonymous (SUNY, 2009) as correlated (Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2014), academic leaders seized by the global technological changes engulfing Zimbabwean tertiary institutions utilised the transformational leadership style in conjunction with the CDMM and to a lesser extent the RDMM, because these enhanced participation, innovation and creativity, which in turn rejuvenated their efficiency and effectiveness (Edu & Amadi, 2020). These theoretical persuasions are compatible with the Ministry's Education 5.0 policy, which entails teaching, research, community service, innovativeness and industrialisation as Zimbabwe sought to reconfigure university degrees in line with its Vision 2030 (Education 5.0,

2019). Similarly, knowledgeable leaders utilised the eclectic approach interchangeably depending on the prevailing situation.

Contrarily, however, academic leaders used the IDMM in programmed situations, although they seemed to be ignorant of how the BRDMM functioned. However, for Ministerial directives and policies, the transactional leadership style was found convenient, although prone to conflicts and divisions. Unbelievable though was their scepticism about the laissez-faire leadership style, even if it was the best in affording them the academic freedom they often yearned for. Perhaps, familiarisation of the style through capacity-building programmes would be the way forward.

Finally, resources should be availed and bureaucratic structures democratised to allow the free flow of information from top to bottom and vice versa, if academic leaders are to operate effectively and efficiently.

Limitations

Although the open-ended questions employed to generate qualitative data did not permit participants to be probed further for clarity and quantitative data sought was limited by the sample, the triangulation of both databases made the findings credible. Accordingly, more studies and information sharing on the phenomenon are necessary to empower academic leaders whose mission is partly to attain world-class standards.

Conclusion

Institutional leaders operating in environments of rapid sociopolitical change have the onerous task of aligning their personal leadership styles with official institutional mandates, as well as ensuring effectiveness in their missions. Subsequently, the utilisation of the transformational leadership style, backed by the RDMM and the CDMM, together with shared governance must be a top priority in tertiary institutions. These findings reinforce the unfolding development in global organisational leadership patterns where leaders aim to give their followers space to transform in tandem with the prevailing dynamic environment.

Acknowledgements

Authors' contributions

Writing the abstract, conceptualisation of the problem, literature survey, designing the online semistructured open-ended questionnaire, generation of qualitative data, analysis and interpretation, triangulation of databases, discussion, writing the original draft and editing the final draft and references were done by V.C.N. Writing the methodology, designing an online quantitative questionnaire, quantitative data collection, analysis, interpretation, discussion, conclusion and reviewing and editing the draft were carried out by N.P. All authors approved the final draft.

Data availability

After the article has been peer reviewed and published, it will be available in the public domain for use by other researchers.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are purely those of the researchers and not the official position of the institution or funder.

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