

Rebuilding Ethical Leadership in African Universities: A Review of Some Principles of Staff Motivation



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Theonestina Katundano
Faculty of Education
The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to review the need for university leadership in universities in Africa to rethink the benefits of ethical leadership practices in relation to principles such as job satisfaction, job security, job performance, academic performance, and management of universities utilities. These principles are key to ethical leadership if put into practice by university management when dealing with teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as students. Faculty members are expected to be role models in an atmosphere of academic freedom which requires full commitment in teaching, research and community service. The paper argues that it is through realizing these principles that universities can promote appreciation of ethical values and sound moral judgment among staff in providing students with services. While acknowledging that ethical principles and values are critical in higher learning institutions, the paper reviews the challenges that interfere with ethical leadership practices and how to overcome them for purposes of achieving staff motivation and eventually academic excellence in universities in Africa.

Paper Type: Literature review

Key words: Universities; Africa; ethics; ethical principles; ethical leadership; rebuilding; reviving; academic freedom; staff motivation; leadership; university education.

Introduction

The world today more than ever before is in dire need of guiding principles and ideas that promote ethical leadership. As pointed out by scholars, ethical leadership has been increasingly underlined as a means through which leaders can tap into employees' positive attitudes towards everyday work, including job satisfaction, and values such good work performance, and excellent academic performance (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012; Kacmar et al., 2011; Neubert et al., 2009). The same issue applies to African public and private universities that seek success and academic excellence in their core business of teaching, research and community service. It is through application of principles of ethics that academic institutions can to provide students and other stakeholders with quality services based human values and sound moral judgment about decisions and choices that affect their lives.



Some of the human values associated with ethical leadership include a sense of caring, sharing, compassion, showing respect for life and for each other. Besides these principles, integrity and justice to fellow human beings should not be overlooked in academic institutions. Other desirable requirements of any leader include commitment and accountability and these cannot be left out when discussing ethical leadership in African universities, both private and public.

It is in the context of leadership whereby teaching and non-teaching staff are encouraged to be animators of similar human values and beyond. They need to be role models to themselves, students and to the society around them and beyond. For this to happen, the employer or university administration should employ a good understanding of the effect of ethical leadership on job satisfaction, good conduct or job performance, commitment, as well as reflecting on challenges that are ailing our academic institutions. This paper reviews these critical principles as the basis for reviving and rebuilding ethical leadership in African private and public universities. It is important to note that rampant employee mobility from public to private universities and vice-versa in search of greener pastures for academic gain and job security can either shape or damage ethical leadership within higher learning institutions.

Concept of Ethical Leadership

From the wider perspective of ethical leadership theory, many definitions have been offered by different educators and leadership experts. However, Merriam Webster Dictionary (2003) defines ethics as the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligations. Ethics then, takes into consideration the discipline dealing with good conduct while ethical leadership carries various definitions such as “good character and the right values or being a person of strong character” (Freeman & Stewart, 2006: 2).

Another notable definition of ethical leadership is, “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Without open communication in any higher learning institutions, misunderstandings are inevitable to occur among university community members, which includes stake holders such as teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents, university board members and even the university council.

On a similar note, Heifetz (2006) and Heifetz and Linsky, (2006) have argued that one of the responsibilities of an ethical leader is to provide directives to followers especially in times of conflicts and turmoil in the work place. Involvement of university management board members in decisions making provides an opportunity for conflict management in case of any issues that cause misunderstandings. In affirming this position, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his speech to the world leaders in Dubai pointed out, the most desirable attributes of good leadership is integrity and ethical uprightness. He emphasized that ethics and morality must be at the centre of all business undertakings as it should be “in all aspects of life” (Tutu, 2009). In the following section, principles of ethical leadership and its impact on staff motivation and outcomes such as job satisfaction,



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employee performance or good conduct, management of utilities, and academic performance in higher education institutions specifically in universities in Africa are discussed.



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Impact of Ethical Leadership to Motivation of Staff

Enhanced Job Satisfaction and Employee Performance

Job satisfaction and employee performance in universities refer to various outcomes at work place. Some of them include employees to feel as sense of belonging and personal connection with the institution. Ethical leaders are expected to treat their employees with respect and accept them as they are. Most importantly is when employees come to work daily and feel respected by senior management. Such a feeling in itself creates a bond between employees and university leadership. At the end of it all, the role of educational leaders is to create an atmosphere whereby non-teaching and teaching staff feel appreciated for their efforts and contributions to the university community.

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The same opinion was expressed by Brown and Mitchell (2010), who noted that leaders who practice human values are expected to carry high standards of ethical behaviours which are exemplified through personal conduct with open communication of sincerity and kindness. Collins (2001) and Gibon (2002) have all emphasized that ethical leadership is about putting others' interest ahead of the self-interest. Such attributes create an atmosphere of employee satisfaction and performance in African universities (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017).

While pay and its benefits are of great importance on the job, it is not more critical than a sense of belonging, connection or being respected by employer within higher learning institution. Being respected and feeling appreciated contributes to job satisfaction to. In the absence of these values, both academic and non-academic staff develop a habit of just reporting to work but not performing duties with commitment as expected. Eventually, the university ends up losing quality staff and students to other universities with higher standards of ethical leadership and a sense of caring. As argued by Yukl, (2013), leaders especially in top management should be on the forefront to play a key role of influencing employee attitudes towards work through ethical practices as well as paying them on time and emoluments they deserve.

Job security is another ethical principle senior management has to provide to its employees. When employees feel insecure in their job, the level of work performance and morale go down. In a survey by Wang, Lu, and Siu (2015), reported that employees ranked job security as the greatest contributing factor to job satisfaction. However, there could be instances whereby employees might feel insecure because of stress and this will lead to low level of work performance. Researchers Wang, et. al (2015) argue that low level of work performance is a call to [universities] to revisit policies and procedures about organizational justice to be put in place so that employees feel treated fairly. On the same note, Brown and Mitchell, (2010) highlight that being fair includes evaluating staff performance, employing new academic and non-academic staff, following promotion procedures by making balanced decisions without favouritism. In this case, university management must make sure that staff medical cover is available,



teaching facilities are established, maintained to high standards, and security is provided across the university campus.

Improved Academic Performance

It is important for university management to own and encourage ethical standards in its day-to-day practices. When senior administration cling to high ethical standards within the university environment this in itself enhances trust in teaching and non-teaching staff as well as to students. In the long run, it also spills out into neighbouring communities and beyond (Jones, and Hughes, 2011).

On the same note, Jones and Hughes (2011: 50) point out that ethical leadership in the university, “builds support for the school and establishes an environment that is conducive to success”. Ethical leadership then should permeate academic departments within faculties, to yield expected academic results which include the following values among staff: commitment to quality teaching, research and community service, availability of qualified academic staff for teaching and supervision of students, designing, moderating, giving and invigilating semester examinations and releasing examination results on time (Men, 2011). Not only that but also equipping the university classrooms with projectors, smart boards, computer labs, science labs promotes practical and quality teaching and learning and attract more students to the university.

The maximization of academic performance cannot occur in a vacuum. It should be two sided. It requires university leadership to equip itself with essential values which are built in self-giving for the benefit of the students and lecturers within their discipline of specialization and the like. Whitaker (2003) echoes same by suggesting that effective leadership should be on the forefront in building trust among its faculties and to maintain solid moral foundation within the university in general. Some factors that indicate the building of trust in academic performance is when the university management works closely with its employees through delegation of power, working as a team, recognizing and acknowledging each one’s contribution at work regardless of tribal background or ethnicity, religion, geographical location, clan, skin colour, age difference and gender. Hawley and Rollie (2002) illustrate this by arguing that a leader must be a role model of the [university] community’s values through showing good examples to faculty members and students with proper support.

Challenges to Ethical Leadership that lead to Demotivation

The following section discusses challenges to ethical leadership in the context of different factors that continue to affect higher learning institutions in Africa. There is no way demotivation can be presented without defining the concept of motivation because it has been the core of many studies as observed by Shaban, Al-Zubai, Ali and Alqotaish (2017). Bucharan and Huczynski (2004:3) define motivation as “the cognitive decision making process through which goal directed behavior is initiated, energized, directed and maintained”. Osabiya (2015: 2) on his part defines motivation as the “driving force within individuals by which they attempt to achieve specific goal in order to fulfill some needs or expectations.”



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Motivation is an important concept in the work place and especially in higher education institutions. However, when it comes to putting it into practice, motivation becomes a problem. The challenge sprouts from a lack of understanding of what it requires to be an ethical leader in academic institutions and how to motivate academic and non-academic employees as well as students. Leaving alone monetary gain, but some of the causes that demotivate the university community include the following the ones discussed below.



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Lack of understanding

Sometimes, there are could be a lack of understanding on the side of university management on how to energize employees, when to recognize and acknowledge their contribution and achievement. A few mentioned causes of demotivation continue to creep in and affect retention of qualified teaching staff and quality productivity. Achievement is gained when the job well done is significantly recognized by the leader or heads of various functions.

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Lack of training opportunities to employees

Employees are always eager to improve their working skills and abilities at work place. As reported out by Sirota, Mischkind, and Meltzer (2006), in their research findings that about 85 percent of the companies they surveyed, indicated that employees' morale declines sharply after their first six months of taking on new jobs. To avoid such boredom, the senior management is expected to motivate its workers with opportunities of improving work skills and abilities through seminars, training sessions, workshops and good working environment. As observed by Drucker, (2002) for lecturers to be able to believe in themselves academically, it important for them to consistently gain knowledge and keep themselves updated as knowledge workers throughout their lives.

Most academic institutions are losing out on the training aspect because of financial corruption. Sometimes, funds allocated for such activities like seminars, workshops, training sessions cannot be traced in some universities because they have been misappropriated by incompetent university officials. The quality of performance for academic staff and non-academic staff is affected because of lack of stewardship by the entrusted parties.

The malpractice of misappropriation of funds affects employees' economic gain by not being paid on time or sometimes receiving half of the salary. Consequently, lecturers end up employing unethical behavior of bargaining with students' on grades with students' tips for financial security (Radda, 2009). Such unethical behavior are frequently reported in Kenyan public universities whereby conflict of interest takes over based on ethnic favouritism when it comes to examination time. This is demonstrated by Ongong'a and Akaranga, (2013) who conducted a study on the subject at Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi.

Lack of open communication

Communication has generally been defined as the process of sharing information, ideas with others at a particular time and place (Heifetz & Linsky, 2006). As emphasized by Microsoft (2005), communication is a vital part of personal life and it is also important in business, education and in higher learning



institutions and in other situations where we encounter with other people. Open communication is key in maintaining team work in university environment but poor communication demoralizes not only lecturers but also students and non-academic staff. It builds the culture of distrust, confusion among university community. "Employees like all people need outlets or channels where they can express their ideas, concerns, thoughts" for example in regular meetings with fellow lecturers and senior management (Heifetz & Linsky, 2006).

Contrary to this, employees develop unethical behavior such as work slow-down, tardiness, absenteeism, and apathy within university campus (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). Students also develop anxiety and stress when there are cases of missing examination marks every semester and no proper action is taken at registry by the university leadership. These are clear signs of lack of open communication in the university community which affects employees' morale as well as students in particular (Saat, 2004).

Lack of active listening

Not only lack of communication but also lack of active listening by senior management to the employees and university community in general tends to paralyze the academic institution. Employees cannot voice up their concerns freely about the financial security, job security and satisfaction because of communication gap (Men & Stacks, 2014). A lack of a listening ear to the university community about what they perceive not going right, it impacts students' academic performance negatively. Students are not awarded marks based on how they perform academically but on how much they can afford to tip the lecturer as observed by Ongong'a and Akaranga, (2013). The same applies to teaching staff who have no alternative but to look for alternative ways of financial survival either being part-timer in other academic institutions or seeking bribes from students during examination time. Lack of active listening by responsible leader in higher learning institutions, creates roadblocks that stand in the way of achieving excellent academic performance, personal and professional goals in life (Fowler and Manktelow, 2005).

Resolving Challenges of Demotivation and Poor Ethical Standards among Staff

In curbing causes of demotivation it is recommended that senior management adopts ethical leadership principles and human values and put them into practice. It is not enough to frame ethical values and hang them by the entrance of administration buildings or on notice boards, but living ethical practices is what motivates employees to contribute willingly to higher learning institutions (Men, 2014). Secondly, employees as human resources in the academic institution need to feel acknowledged, respected, accepted, listened, and appreciated. After all, the universities are founded on respect to human values and therefore should be run on those beliefs and traditions that the society holds most sacred.

Thirdly, universities should become symbols of the spirit of its community, the guardian of its morals and bastion of hope. If this is to happen, university leaders have to employ ethical values by playing a key role in transmitting and



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diffusing values, norms, and code of ethics (Radda, 2009). Consequently, the leader is expected to build on ethical and moral practices to keep the level of motivation high through training of academic and non-academic staff for career development and improvement. This is part and parcel of in-service programmes within higher learning institutions.

Finally, there is a need to maintain good relationship which allows treating employees as fellow human beings not as work objects. The development of team work as well as maintaining channels of open communication with staff and students minimize the level of mistrust. This is to emphasize that leadership communication as a tool for employee encouragement and positive motivation within an organization. Once employees are engaged, they feel trusted and cared for instead of being invisible at place of work and are likely to extend this to other stakeholders leading to more harmony and productivity. Therefore university leadership need develop team work spirit and a sense of belonging to maintain employee retention, academic success and quality assurance within higher learning institutions (Men, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that it is vital to revisit and rebuild ethical leadership practices among leaders and administrators of higher learning institutions, if these institutions are to be efficient. Secondly African Universities have to revitalize decision making practices, the way knowledge is disseminated to students, how teaching, non-teaching staff and how other stakeholders are handled on daily basis in the conduct of university business. In the course of rebuilding ethical leadership, internalizing of moral values such as honesty, fairness, accountability, commitment, kindness, altruism are key in guiding leadership behavior on daily basis along with open communication. These are vital ethical core values that act as cornerstones in the foundation for ethical leadership and transparent organizational communication and without employing them, the core ethical values with commitment and caring heart, ethical leadership will be hard to achieve in East African public and private universities. The papers stresses the urgent need for university leadership and stakeholders to rebuild ethical leadership practices for fostering academic excellence, attracting students who are immediate customers, employee retention, and for quality assurance purposes in higher learning institutions.

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About the author

Sr. Dr. Theonestina Katundano is a member of the Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Bukoba, Tanzania. She is a Senior Lecturer at The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) where she teaches Educational Administration and Planning in the Faculty of Education. She is currently the Head of Academic Programmes Development and has held a number of positions including Coordinator of Church Management and Leadership Programme and Head of Undergraduate Studies at the Centre for Social Justice and Ethics in the same university. Sr. Dr. Katundano holds a B.A. (English Literature) from Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A., M.Ed (English as a Second Language) from Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A. and a PhD (Educational Policy and Leadership) from Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A. She is a member of Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) and Tanzania Economic Development Initiative (TEDI), Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA and Tanzania Chapter. Her current areas of research interest are gender relations, women in education, ethics in leadership and career progression, transformational leadership and African family values. Sr. Dr. Katundano can be contacted through: tkatundano@cuea.edu and kasabagotheo@gmail.com



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