

Assessment of Transformational and Autocratic Leadership on employee engagement in the South African Education Sector

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Abstract. Leadership plays a significant role in an organisation. Leadership style centred on the behaviour the leader exhibit when dealing with members of the team. The study examined the impact of transformational and autocratic leadership style on employee engagement at higher education in South Africa. Evidence from the existing literature suggests that motivating employees, elevating their desire for achievement and providing support, have advocated transformational leadership style as employee engagement enhancer. However, an autocratic leadership style dictates procedures and policies while ignoring communication, resulting in disengaged employees. Fewer studies focus on transformational and autocratic leadership style in a higher education in South Africa. The study provided useful insights into the two types of leadership styles in higher education and their effect on employee engagement level, as well as the importance of employee engagement in achieving the organisation's mission and vision. The study adopted a quantitative approach and used survey design. A structured questionnaire was distributed online to 210 universities staff and 131 responses were received. The findings of this study indicated that transformational leadership styles have a significant positive relationship with employee engagement, whereas autocratic leadership styles have a negative relationship with employee engagement. Furthermore, the results show that the autocratic leadership style and employee engagement relationship is insignificant. The study has made a recommendation that organisation use an appropriate leadership style that will enhance employee engagement in order to achieve organisational mandate.

Keywords: Leadership, transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, employee engagement.

1. Introduction

Leadership plays a significant role in an organisation. Leadership is the key to achieving a high performing education system (Veldsman, Johnson & Madonsela, 2016:189). As social architects, leaders play a crucial role in an organization by defining vision, strategic direction, and developing a relationship (Nel & Werner 2014:291). Veldsman, Johnson and Madonsela (2016:206) pointed out that leadership can positively change organisational effectiveness. A leader's leadership style is how he or she directs and motivates others to achieve organizational goals (Khajeh, 2018:2). Nel and Werner

(2014:290) said that organisations require strong leadership for optimal effectiveness. According to Shuck and Herd (2012), a leader can either create an environment that encourages or discourages engagement. Shuck and Herd (2012) posited that leaders who engage their followers make a significant difference in their workplace.

Leadership need to be used as a tool to implement strategies to manage employee engagement to retain employees' high level of commitment. Today's leaders confront the difficult task of rebuilding and regaining employee trust (Robbins & Coulter, 2016:538) because leaders often make the unintended mistake of mapping out solutions too swiftly (Kriemer 2019:26). The changing aspects of the higher education system, mergers, restructuring, and employee engagement become lesser and lesser due to the uncertainty of staff. Veldsman, Johnson and Madonsela (2016:206, 338) stated that the South African higher education system has been significantly remodelled through a process of mergers and realignment and this shift created leadership implications as a result there is a need for appropriate engagement model that includes organisational strategic intent, culture, growth and development of the organisation's leadership. Nel and Werner (2014:281) state that, "employee engagement was a positive predictor of task performance and further explains that poor leadership and insufficient employee engagement has a tremendous effect on organisational performance".

Today, the level of competition within the worldwide market is rapidly intensifying. Organisational leaders are forced to explore efficiency strategies that will enable them to compete successfully in the global market. This calls for leaders who will create and respond positively to change (Bass & Avolio, 1992:21). "Over the past several years, the development of high engagement workplaces has emerged as a strategic response to address the need to achieve results in a challenging environment" (Joyner, 2015:1131).

Higher education institutions leadership has found itself embroiled in sequence after sequence of new issues which students have put in front of them that they have had difficulty addressing (Veldsman, Johnson & Madonsela, 2016:217). Student enrolment has increased and that calls for more funding for higher education and more student accommodation. Every year students are financially and academically excluded which warrants for management to involve students in trying to resolve those issues. Some of the issues are difficult to resolve as they are governed by the state and leaders of the universities who are in no position to give solutions. The emphasis on employee engagement is becoming less priority as leaders' main focus remains on students' issues.

"Research around employee engagement is emerging and several models suggest leadership as a crucial element in the development of employee engagement, there remains a gap in understanding what leadership behaviours could affect engagement-encouraging cultures as well as the processes around which leader behaviours bring about higher levels of engagement" (Shuck & Herd, 2012:156).

Gallup (2013) reported that 6 percent of employees globally are disengaged. Furthermore, the state of global workplace report (Gallup, 2021) indicated that employee engagement has dropped by two percent globally from 22 percent in 2019 to 20 percent in 2020 and stated that leaders will need to address the decrease in employee engagement. The trend in global employee engagement reported that Africa is the second highest level of employee engagement globally at 67 percent. Even though the African continent well adapted when it comes to employee engagement, South Africa is still lagging (Vittee, 2015). Several studies have focused on transformational leadership style, and many have shown that transformational leadership style has a greater impact on employee engagement than autocratic leadership style (Kalsoom, Khan & Zubair, 2018:23). There is no enough evidence of the effect of transformational leadership style and autocratic leadership style in the South African higher education institutions.

The main objective of this research study is to determine the effect of transformational leadership style and autocratic leadership style in the South African higher education institutions. The researcher developed the following hypothesis in order to determine the impact of transformational and autocratic leadership styles on employee engagement.

H1: Transformational leadership style has a significant relationship on employee engagement.

H2: Autocratic leadership style has a significant relationship on employee engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Leadership

Robbins and Coulter (2016:541) defined leadership as a process of leading and persuading followers to attain a common purpose. Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy (2012:35) concurred with the definition stated above as the act of influencing a well-organised people toward achieving agreed goals. Nel and Werner (2014:91) posited that leadership is the process that involves a single person persuading others to direct their abilities and efforts willingly towards achieving organisational goals

2.2 Transformational leadership style

Bass and Avolio (1990:22) explained that “transformational leaders elevate the desires of followers for achievement and self-development, while also promoting the development of groups and organisation”. Bass and Avolio (1990:22) identified four basic components that a transformational leader exhibit to influence followers, namely; idealised influence, individually considerate, intellectually stimulating and inspirational motivation.

- **Idealised influence**

Leaders with idealised influence are visionary and mission-driven; they earn followers' trust, confidence, and trust; and they achieve strong individual identification. They make a great effort to develop individuals to achieve optimum performance (Bass & Avolio, 1990:22). Northouse (2016:167) contended that these people are highly recognised and trusted by their followers, and they have high moral and ethical standards.

- **Individually considerate**

Northouse (2016:169) described individualized consideration as “a representative of leaders who provide a supportive climate in which they listen carefully to the individual needs of followers”. Leaders focus on identifying the capabilities and the needs of followers and address them individually. They delegate, coach, advice and provide feedback to the subordinates. Furthermore, they uplift the confidence level of the subordinates and address their needs to take more responsibility. (Bass & Avolio, 1990:22).

- **Intellectually stimulating**

Leaders timeously acknowledge and encourage followers to deal with problems by applying different perspectives and they create an environment that fosters innovation and creativity. Followers become more innovative and effective in analysing and applying strategies in problem solving without supervision from the leader (Bass & Avolio, 1990:22).

- **Inspirational motivation**

Leaders optimistically and enthusiastically communicate with their followers the visions that need to be achieved with confidence. They motivate their followers by providing challenges and meaningful roles that will assist them in achieving their goals (Bass & Avolio, 1990:22). Northouse (2016:169) affirmed that this type of leadership enhanced team spirit and motivate followers to excel in their work through encouraging words.

Transformational leadership serves as a solid relationship between followers and leaders, allowing for a clear grasp of motivational levels, values, and interests (Khajeh, 2018:3). Rees and French (2015:92) affirmed that this type of leader highly motivates their followers and demonstrates devotion by articulating and conveying a clear vision, which frequently appeals to followers' higher concepts and values.

According to Nel and Werner (2014:302), a transformational leader serves as a role model, coach, and inspirational figure, encouraging employees and other stakeholders to joyfully contribute to the organisation's goals. Based on Khajeh (2018:3), transformational leaders develop personalised relationships with employees that create a climate in which people are satisfied and, as a result, perform better overall.

2.3 Autocratic leadership style

Robbins and Coulter (2016:525) defined autocratic leader as a leader who makes unilateral decisions, imposes work procedures and does not allow or limit employee participation. The autocratic leaders expect their subordinates to work based on their instructions. This type of leader promotes one-sided conversation and lacks creativity (Khajeh, 2018:5). Puni, Ofei, and Okoe, (2014) described autocratic leadership style as leaders who focus more on performance and less on people while keeping track of followers' mistakes. Edem (1998) as cited by Akor (2014:149) provide a summary of the characteristics of an autocratic leader;

- The leader dictates procedures and policies with no or little participation in decision-making from the subordinates.
- Tasks and methods are imposed on the subordinates
- There is a lack or no communication between the group and the leader
- The leader is always suspicious and nagging.

Autocratic leadership style is characterised by the leader centralising decision making power, and reluctance to share authority, position and power with the members of the team (Akor, 2014:149).

2.4 Employee engagement

Employee engagement is the most recent trend that is drawing attention to an organisation's succession in this competitive edge. Organisations with employees who are highly engaged generate more revenue than organisations with employees who are disengaged (Barik & Kochar, 2017:33). Shahid and Azhar (2013:252) added that employee engagement plays a major role to ensure that a business succeeds.

"Employee engagement is when employees are connected to, satisfied with and enthusiastic about their jobs" (Robbins & Coulter, 2016:466) and (Dessler, 2013:683) added that they show commitment and dedication. Leaders that are engaged proactively coach their employees and give them a room to develop and grow (Nel & Werner, 2014:281). Rees and French (2015:237) posited that engaged employees can lead to both organisational success and employee well-being. Dessler (2013:45) identified employees that engaged as those who invest both physically and mentally in their work and contribute to the success of the organisation. Shuck and Herd (2012:160) supported the view that when you develop a high level of employee engagement it will result in cost and benefit.

It is important to make sure that leadership exhibit actions that foster engagement and support activities that include ensuring that employees have a better understanding of how their department, contribute to the success of the organisation, have a clear picture of how their effort have an impact on achieving organisational goals and get a sense of accomplishment from working at the organisation (Dessler, 2013:352). "When engaged in their work, employees find meaning and excitement in the work they perform and go beyond role expectations and job descriptions, an antecedent of employee engagement" (Shuck & Herd, 2012:160). Kriemer (2019:28) stated that leaders need to foster an environment in which people feel valued regardless of their role.

Attridge (2009) contended that a high level of work engagement occurs when employees are involved in, committed to, and enthusiastic about their jobs. Das and Mishra (2014:75) added that most researchers describe employees who are engaged as those who are actively involved in their work, concentrated on what they are doing with full energy, they lose track of time as they are very focused. According to Robinson (2012:2), "Gallup researchers show that there are three types of employees:

A. Engaged

Employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organisation forward. As depicted on figure 2.2.

B. Not-engaged

Employees are essentially 'check out'. They are sleepwalking through their workday, putting time – but not energy or passion into work.

C. Actively disengaged

Employees are not just unhappy at work; they are busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish”.

3. Research methodology

The researcher adopted a quantitative approach to reach the study objectives. According to Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2018:16), the quantitative approach depends intensively on statistics and numbers in the analysis and interpretation of findings from the population that can be generalised. The researcher chose a quantitative approach as the population was too large and the sample was drawn so that the findings can be generalised. Kumar (2014:14) reported that “the quantitative approach is rooted in the philosophy of rationalism; follows a rigid, structured and predetermined set of procedures to explore; aims to quantify the extent of variation in a phenomenon; emphasises the measurement of variables and the objectivity of the process; believes in substation based on a large sample size, gives importance to the validity and reliability of findings and communicates findings in an analytical and aggregate manner, drawing conclusions and inferences that can be generalised.” The data was collected using a survey questionnaire after adhering to all of the protocol and permission requirements. The respondents' responses were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale.

4. Findings and discussion

Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used as a measurement to determine the data's reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha values for transformational leadership and autocratic leadership were .712 and .726 respectively and the Cronbach's Alpha values for employee engagement was .971. An alpha of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable in most social science research.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of variables

	Autocratic	Transformational	Employee engagement
Means	2.55	3.47	2.93
Standard deviation	1.30	1.31	1.33

Table 1 shows that transformational leadership and employee engagement had the highest mean, while the standard deviations for all variables were nearly the same. This reflects that the majority of respondents believed their leaders exemplified a high level of transformational leadership, which increased employee engagement.

Table 2: Regression analysis

		B	Beta	t	Sig
1	(Constant)	1.339		2.668	.000
	Transformational	.571	.497	3.821	.000
	Autocratic	.072	.071	.617	.539
a. Dependent Variable: Employee engagement					

The beta values for transformational leadership styles was .571 as shown in table 2. This shows that there was a moderate positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement, which is significant at a 5% level. The autocratic leadership beta value was .072 with a statistically insignificant value of .539 which was greater than 0.05. Although autocratic leadership can play a role in increasing employee engagement, the relationship has shown insignificant. This means that transformational. The findings indicate that transformational leadership style contribute highly to

employee engagement and the relationship is significant. Furthermore, the find no relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee engagement.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

The present study was designed to determine the effect of transformational and autocratic leadership style on employee engagement. The results of this investigation show that transformational was found to have a positive relationship with employee engagement. Furthermore, the findings indicated a negative and insignificant association between autocratic employee engagements. These findings reaffirm the low level of employee engagement that exists around the world. In conclusion, organisations that place a greater emphasis on selecting appropriate leadership styles are more likely to have a higher level of employee engagement and a motivated workforce eager to go beyond to achieve business objectives.

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