



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: A TOOL FOR FOSTERING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Ethical leadership is a leadership that is grounded in ethical norms and practice. Leadership in governance is a concern in local government because in spite of the various local government reforms like the 1976 reforms, the country still lacks good governance and its consequent socio-economic developments. So the Nigeria local government system is engulfed in series of leadership crises, and one that is due to unethical practices and behaviour of public officials of the local government. The absence of good governance is identified as the major set back in the third-world countries. Moreso, the inability of public officials to provide good governance has constituted a major barrier to socio-economic development in Nigeria. This work therefore discusses ethical leadership and how it could inspire and sustain good governance in the public sector.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, good governance, local government system, leadership

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian local government (LG) system is engulfed in a leadership crisis, one that is due to unethical practices and behaviors of public officials in LG councils. Their unethical conduct and actions have created a leadership crisis that has adversely affected the quality of governance at the local government level. The absence of good governance is identified as a major setback in social and economic development efforts in third-world countries (Kurtz & Schrank, 2007). According to Azeez (2009), the inability of public officials to provide good governance has constituted a major barrier to socioeconomic development into Nigerian society.

The 1976 local government reform, which introduced the present LG system in Nigeria, was primarily undertaken to improve the quality of governance and the provision of public service. However, those in the helm of LG administration have failed to live up to their responsibilities (Agbokaba & Oghonna, 2004; Ukiwo, 2006). Okafor (1984, p. 328) observed the conditions of the rural people as he noted that “the gross inadequacy of such amenities as piped borne water, transport facilities, electricity, and health facilities in the large part of rural Nigeria is a major opposing factor to their well being of the rural population”. The reason for these conditions is the lack of ethical and effective government leadership at the grassroots level and, in fact, at all levels of government. The public officials at the local level of government have engaged in unethical practices and behaviors with

reckless abandon (Nwanma, 2008). The lack of ethical leadership by those in leadership positions in the local councils hinders the achievement of good governance, which is the aim of LG reforms. Achabe (1983, p. 1) pointed out that the Nigerian problem stemmed from leadership failure. Further, he said that the cause of bad governance in Nigeria was, and still is, “the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmark of true leadership”. This observation suggests that the major cause of poor leadership in the Nigerian public sector is the deficiency of moral integrity among public officials. Ethical integrity is one of the essential elements of good leadership that underpins good governance. The dearth of ethical practices by Nigerian government officials is the bane of good governance. The citizens, especially those in rural local government areas (LGAs), are yearning for positive signs of good governance (Agbokaba & Ogbonna, 2004). Ethical leadership is necessary for good outcomes in government (Menzel, 2007). Nigeria has valuable resources, especially crude oil, which if well harnessed, managed, and invested toward serving the public interest could enable the country to experience tremendous growth and development in every facet of life. For instance, if the oil revenues were to be managed appropriately and utilized to serve the public interest, the country could have healthcare and educational systems that are accessible and affordable; also, the country could establish strong and viable socioeconomic structures that promote economic advancement as well as effective political institutions that enhance good governance. However, Nigeria is still far from attaining these socio-economic and political feats because of the apparent unchecked selfish interests and corruption of its public officials, which undermine good governance outcomes.

The Importance of Organizational Leadership

Van Wart (2003) noted that the importance of leadership is axiomatic to most people in whatever setting. The academic inquiry into organizational leadership underpins the creed “that leaders are a necessary component of organizational change, efficiency, and effectiveness” (Rubin, Dierdorfg & Brown, 2010, p. 216). Bass (1999, p. 8) argued that leadership is very important. For it makes a difference in any organizational setting, despite any skepticism about its importance. They further asserted, “Leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions”. Organizational leaders are influential in setting the tone of operations in their organizations (O’Connell & Bligh, 2009); this implies that leadership is vital to the existence of an organization. What matters even more is an effective, dynamic, and ethical leadership. Van Wart (2003, p. 214) stated that effective leadership makes possible the provision of higher quality and efficient goods and services, a sense of good direction and vision, alignment with the environment, a healthy mechanism for innovation and creativity, and a resource For building a vibrant organizational culture and climate.

He further observed that leadership is not an easy job in any sense of the word. The members of organizations or citizens of nations expect their leaders to use the resources of their organizations or countries to advance the common good. The leaders are blamed and criticized when things go wrong in their organizations. People have different and conflicting ideas about how the affairs of their groups, organizations, or nations should be managed. Burns (1976, p. 2) remarked, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomenon on earth”.

Northouse (2007) posited that leadership is a process by which a leader influences a group of people to achieve a common goal. Understanding leadership as a process of influence, Mendonca (2001) asserted that true leaders articulate the needs and hopes of the followers and, then, inspire the followers toward realizing the vision that best meets their needs and that of the organization; a true and effective leadership is essentially other-serving ad not self-serving. Leadership in a public organization is essentially for the service of the interest of the public, requiring the articulation of needs and aspirations of the citizens, motivating them, and using the available public resources to realize the vision for the people (Mendonca, 2001). The leader’s vision, behavior, and actions are crucial for positive organizational outcomes.

Kanungo and Mendonca (1996, p. 3) summarized the importance of an organizational leader’s vision and behavior in this manner: The leader’s vision inspires and articulates the organization’s mission; provides the basis for the organization’s objectives and goals; communicates the beliefs and values that influence and shape the organization’s culture and behavioral norms; and lays the foundation for organizational strategies, policies, and procedures. The organization’s mission statement and policies-

however noble, well crafted, and articulated-are absolutely futile if the leader's actions and behavior are inconsistent with these statements.

They further underscored one of the salient dimensions of leadership, which is the ability of leaders to influence the beliefs and values that form the culture and behavioral standards in an organization. Recognizing this influential capability of leadership, Kanungo and Mendonca concluded that leadership "is indeed the soul of the organization". An organization of any kind, certainly, needs leadership for its survival and achievement of its goal.

The Importance of Ethics in Organizational Leadership

Ethics is very critical in leadership in any organizational setting. Ethics, as used here, refers to values and principles that guide right and wrong behavior (Menzel, 2007). Lanctote and Irving (2007) remarked that leadership scholars and practitioners have accentuated the link between ethics and leadership. Doble (1998) noted that leadership demands ethics because of the responsibilities it shoulders. Bowman (2008) noted that ethics is the key to the flourishing of democracy and its administration. Those in leadership positions in a democratic government and, in fact, in all forms of government need to be ethical as they pilot the affairs of their organizations or societies.

Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) stressed the need for ethics in leadership when they observed that the moral quality of individuals living in a society determined the survival of and the flourishing of life in that society. Those in a leadership role, to a greater extent, play a part in determining the moral quality of their followers. Their behaviour influence can positively or negatively impact the moral fiber of the society (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996, p. 6). They noted that leaders do more than physical harm any time their actions and behavior fail to be in congruence with the shared moral values. Such neglect or compromise can cause moral cynicism, which "like a cancer, corrodes the moral health of society". Ethical leadership plays a Pivotal and critical role in any group, organization, and society at large.

Northouse (2007, p. 346) remarked that the leader's influence has significant impact on their followers' lives. He noted that such influence has a great ethical burden and responsibility. Sendjaya (2005, p. 76) observed that the exercise of authority and power always involves ethical challenges and, as such, no true leadership exists without morality "since all forms of leadership is value-laden". Kanungo and Mendonca (1996, p. 3) remarked, "Effective organizational leaders need ethics as fish need water and human beings need air". Northouse also observed the centrality of ethics in the leadership phenomenon. Comprehending the place and role of ethics in leadership leads to the conclusion that no true leadership exists without ethics.

Ethics and Public Administration

Public administration is the government's vehicle for providing its services to the public (Ayodele & Bolaji, 2007) and "for expressing the values and preferences of citizens, communities, and society as a whole" (Bouggon, 2007, p. 7). Public administration is the instrument by which, through efficient and effective institutions, government provides those goods and services that advance socioeconomic and human development of people. Governance is the method or process in which responsibility or function is discharged by the public officials. Good governance is conceptualized here to mean government capacity to discharge responsibilities or functions in an effective, transparent, accountable, responsible, just manner (Hope, 2005).

It is the expectation of the public that officials at all levels of government will utilize public resources for the well being of the citizenry. Citizens expect efficient and effective delivery of healthcare services, education systems, and crime prevention systems from their government (Seok-Eun. 2005). Effective delivery of goods and services that foster socioeconomic improvement and strong democratic institutions are indications that a government is at the top of providing good governance to its citizens as good custodians of the public good. People's confidence and trust in the government increases when their public leaders make policies and take actions that promote the interests and well-being of the entire community.

Public officials play a vital role in formulating and implementing public policies that impact the lives of many people (Ayodele & Bolaji, 2007). Because of this influence, their decisions and actions carry enormous ethical weight and responsibility (Northouse, 2007). In a democratic system of government, ethics is pivotal for the achievement of good governance. Ethics underpins democratic government and its administration as it "provides the preconditions for the making of good public policy, so all

policies depend on it” (Bowman, 2008. P. 627). Public administrators cannot afford to be unethical if they are to serve the public interest.

Fournier (2009) observed that having ethical requirements for public office holders is not something new; it is as old as democracy. Underscoring the link in a deeper fashion, Bowman and Williams (1997) posited that the question of ethics in public service is as old as government. Fournier (2009) noted that ethics are a fundamental element in democracy. From antiquity to the present, scholars both from secular and religious spheres underscored the necessity of ethics in leadership for the attainment of good governance (Toor & Ofori, 2009). If public officials are men and women of sound ethics and good character, the likelihood exists that public resources will be properly and judiciously utilized for the public interest. Ethical public officials are likely to be aware of their responsibility to use their positions and the public resources for advancing the common good. Such officials know that their call is to serve the people and they are committed to serving the needs of the citizens. Contrary to that, unethical public officials are more concerned for their self-interests than for the public interest, as noted by Greenleaf (1997), putting themselves first rather than the public they serve.

LG administrators are the frontline providers of services that are of critical importance to the people at the grassroots; therefore, the concern about how the resources are utilized and how the services are provided is not out of place. The officials at the local level of government must be conscious of ethics in public administration (Menzel, 1992, p. 94). The administrators at the local councils have the moral obligation to provide efficient and effective public services to their council jurisdictions. The efficiency and effectiveness of the services they provide, in great measure, determine “the well-being and quality of life of the whole nation” (Mitchinson 2003, p.242). Ojo (2009) noted that the major reason for coups in many Third World countries was the lack of good governance by public leaders. People are bereft of essential goods and services as every successive government was unable to provide for their needs.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP; 2001) observed that there is an urgent need for ethical practice in public service. This awareness is based on the belief that ethical public administrators’ foster socioeconomic development and their unethical practices jeopardize and impede development, “resulting in a loss of confidence in public institutions and an erosion of the rule of law itself”. Public officials have the obligation to be ethical in discharging their responsibilities and duties to the public. They are expected to keep to ethical principles, rules, and values that promote good governance. Pops (1994) remarked that keeping to ethical principles presents preconditions for making good public policy and it increase the likelihood that the public administrators make the right ethical choice based on public interest, hence boosting the confidence of the citizenry.

Fournier (2009) noted that ethical values of honesty, integrity, and accountability are means for enhancing democracy as a form of government and as a way of life; so, ethical practice of government officials has been one of the major concerns of political philosophers. The author also remarked that though everyone is a vanguard of ethical practice in democratic societies, those who hold positions of leadership in government usually set the tone. Public administrators, elected and non-elected, are expected to be models of ethical behavior not only to those they lead within public organizations and institutions but also to people in society at large. Setting the tone of ethical practice also requires public officials to be committed to the principles and values of democratic governance.

Although ethics is highly needed in every organization, it can be argued that its need is even more crucial in a public organization. In fact, the highest standard of ethics is required of all public officials based on the fact that the government has enormous authoritative influence on citizens; it collects levies and taxes from citizens: taxpayers expect integrity from public officials (Brewer, 2009). The administrators in public service are public “servants” accountable to the people. The primary purpose for establishing public administration as an instrument of governance is to enhance and achieve social and economic justice (Tompkins, 2005). Thompson, (1998) concurred that ethics in public service should be regarded as a reminder to the public office holders that they are there primarily to serve and be accountable to the public. Hellsten and Larbi (2006) made it clear that public service ethics underscore the fact that the power of public officials to manage public affairs is only given in trust and that they should utilize the power to promote the common good.

Consequently, ethical leadership in public service remains vital for achieving sustainable socioeconomic development and good governance. Doig (1995) observed that good government

guarantees “a responsive governmental and state administrative framework” that assists in making good governance and economic development attainable.

Ethical Leadership and Good Governance

The public service is important and crucial for enhancing good governance. The United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) (2000) remarked that public service functions as an administrative structure through which government carries out its policy decisions and policy implementations. The standard of governance and its outcomes in any government reflect the caliber of officials that constitute the administrative force. A good and efficient administration is equally a responsive one; it takes cognizance that purpose and obligation of government is to protect peoples’ rights and promote their individual and collective well-being as human beings (UNPAN, 2000). Good governance is conceptualized here to mean government capacity to discharge its responsibilities in an effective, transparent, accountable, responsible, and just manner (Hope, 2005).

Good governance in third world countries, as in other corners of the world, hinges “on many factors such as sound leadership, encouraging grassroots participation in the governing process, accountability and transparency of government, among others” (UNPAN, 2000, p. 37). Such sound leadership could only be guaranteed by men and women of moral integrity who understand the importance and the role of ethics and practice in the leadership process toward achievement of the common good. Morrell and Hartley (2006) underscored the importance of ethics as a fundamental and crucial factor for effective political leadership in local government.

Ethical leadership has long been linked with good government, though the bureaucratization of modern government has placed more emphasis on managerial efficiency than on ethics (Macaulay & Lawton, 2006). Many scholars concur that the widespread unethical conducts and scandals in both public and private sectors is the outcome of the negligence of ethics and practice by organizational leadership (Cohen & Eimicke, 1995; Kernaghan, 1996; Maguire, 1997; Farazmand, 2002; Fournier, 2009). Fournier (2009), for example, noted that “most people are dismayed with the state of affairs. They are sick of the deception, cheating, and corruption. People don’t know who, or what, to trust”. However, Menzel (2007) observed that good governance, which is crucial to democratic government, is dependent on ethical leadership of government officials. Also, some international bodies like the UN, the World Bank, the OECD have emphasized the importance of ethical practice among government officials and have linked ethical leadership with good governance. Therefore, they have taken the initiative to encourage member states and establish projects to combat and eliminate corruption and promote ethical practices in their public administration (Richter & Burke, 2007). The Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM, 2007) noted that the public is demanding higher standards of ethics, transparency, and accountability in the public sector. It also argued that ethics, transparency, and accountability are the prerequisite values of good governance and sustainable development that support and encourage responsive public policy and high levels of public sector performance. Similarly, Hope (2005) noted the statement of the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that “good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development”. The President of the African Development Bank (AFDB) stated. “Good government underpins sustainable development and poverty reduction in the longer term” (p. 385). The quest and demand for good governance is based on the conviction that it is the ideal and necessary to surmount “the socio-economic and political impediments to development that have rocked, especially the developing world for decades” (Kakumba & Fourie, 2007, p. 65l).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Constitutional Amendment**

We recommend that there should be constitutional amendments for any clause that wants state government to withhold and suspend council’s election and undermine the autonomy of local council. Because the constitution grants LG a status of a tier of government that should have its own elected officials to run its administration, it is pertinent that this constitutional mandate is respected in every state of the country. The issue of council’s election and tenureship must not be left in the hands of state governors and House of Assembly.

- **Creating a National Ethics Awareness (NEA)**
The NEA program we advocate should focus on values that are vital for good citizenship and on those values that promote democratic governance. The awareness platform should not be limited to only the mass media and social networking technologies, but it should extend to village hall meetings and faith-based institutions. The whole society must be reoriented on the importance of ethical values and practice for the achievement ethical and just society and good governance, and this must be done through relentless and consistent education.
- **Restoration of Moral Education into the School System**
The importance of teaching ethics in schools cannot be overemphasized. Moral education is essential for the formation and acquisition of virtues or good characters that are vital for social cohesion and development in a society. The lack of moral education in schools is probably the key cause of leadership crisis in Nigeria. For the achievement of a democratic government and governance, Nigerian citizens, particularly public officials, must learn to care about the rights of others and the public interests.
- **Existence of an active civil society**
Efforts toward encouraging and sustaining ethics and practice in public administration must include the aptitude to exposing public officials that get involved in corruption and misappropriation of public funds. The mass media provides effective avenues for exposing corrupt public officials. When the media personnel focus on exposing the corrupt deals of the public officials by reporting the facts on the daily newspapers and on the television news and the public begin to condemn and demand the resignation of such officials, it will help to foster ethical practice in government administration. If the public officials know that their unethical practice will not miss eagle eyes of the journalists, then, many will be deterred from behaving wrongly. So, there should sensitization on the importance of the freedom of information bill.

CONCLUSION

This work made on in-depth study of the ethical leadership and how it could advance and sustain good governance in the Nigeria local government administrative system. However, the system had yield to meet the vision of 1976 local government reformist and that of the citizens; it has failed, inspite of the huge amount of funds allocated to the system in order to fulfill its goals. Dishonesty and corruption within the system are among the major factors that renders local government administration ineffective.

The country's public administration lacks the integrity required to ensure ethical practice as they carry out their duties. So the lack of ethical integrity hinders the local government officials from providing a good and effective leadership at the local councils. This study therefore suggests that ethical leadership is a vital tool for promoting good governance.

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