

Influence of Leadership Style on Academic Staff Retention in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

Public Universities are operating in highly competitive environment which requires that these institutions retain their core employees in order to gain and retain competitive advantage. For the last one decade these institutions have experienced competition both locally and globally in terms of students and staff. Consequently they are no longer the key players in the provision of higher education in Kenya. The role of leaders in employee retention is critical since their leadership style play a key role in determining whether the employees leave or stay. The study sought to find out the influence of leadership style on academic staff retention in public universities. Data was collected from 547 academic staff members sampled from the seven fully fledged public universities in Kenya. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data that was collected using questionnaires. From the research it was established that leadership style inversely and significantly influences intention to leave of academic staff and hence there is need to embrace leadership style that promotes staff retention for these institutions to thrive.

Key words: Leadership, Leadership style, staff retention, Public universities in Kenya

1.0 Introduction

Employee retention is one of the most critical issues facing organisational managers as a result of the shortage of skilled manpower, economic growth and high employee turnover (Michael, 2008). It is imperative for organisations through the employment process, to attract quality employees to the organisation. However, it is more important for managers to device strategies with which to retain the talented employees in the service of their organisations in order for employees to benefit from the investment already made in them. The role of leaders and their leadership style is crucial in employee retention. In the current competitive environment the leaders have to steer their organisations in the competitive business environment. They will weather the challenge if they value employees as assets and as the ones to give their organisations the competitive advantage. This competitive advantage will be guaranteed if the core employees are retained for as long as possible so that continuity of competitive goods and services is assured.

1.1 The Concept of employee retention

The concept of employee retention emerged with regularity in 1970's and early 1980's because prior to this, most people entered into organisations and remained for a very long time ,sometimes for the duration of their working life.

But as job mobility and voluntary job changes began to increase dramatically employers found themselves with the problem of employee turnover and a matching management tool known as employee retention began to be developed (Mckeown, 2002).

Retention is a voluntary move by an organisation to create an environment which engages employees for long term (Michael, 2008). Retention of human resources refers to the attempts to ensure that employees stay in the organization and that voluntary turnover will be minimized. The main purpose of retention is to prevent competent employees from leaving the organisation as this could have adverse effects on productivity and service delivery (Chiboiwa, 2010). Also, retention allows senior and line managers to attract and effectively retain critical skills and high performing employees (Michael, 2008). The objective of retention policies should be to identify and retain committed employees for as long as is mutually profitable to the organisation and the employee (Sutherland, 2004).

1.2 The Concept of Leadership and Leadership Style

According to Mat (2008), leadership definitions keep evolving as scholars try to simplify the definition to enable people to understand the concept easily and to make it less complicated and more practical in daily business. For centuries leadership studies have been obsessed with leaders, and with identifying the characteristics required for effective leadership. Even though it is clearly stated that it is difficult to give leadership a single definition, people keep exploring this area of study. It shows that there is no stopping point for leadership study and it has become an essential element in social science.

According to Okumbe (1998), leadership is a process of encouraging and helping others to do something of their own volition, neither because it is required nor because of the fear of consequences of non-compliance. Leadership is thus a process of encouraging and helping others to work enthusiastically towards objectives. It is the human factor that binds a group together and motivates it towards goals transforming the groups potentials into reality.

Leadership has many definitions but no real consensus; essentially it is a relationship through which one person influences the behavior or actions of other people. In everyday speech leadership and Management are used interchangeably. Management is about developing, planning and controlling of organizational resources while leadership is about the aligning of people to the expected outcomes of the vision. In order to lead one must be able to manage and hence the two are closely related (Gwavuya, 2011). Leaders use their influence factor to draw people towards achieving goals and to maximize the results in the organization. The influence factor does not mean the leader having power over the followers and controlling or directing them to the goals the leaders want to achieve, rather it is the leaders' own actions that affect the followers behavior and actions. Generally, followers will emulate the leader's acts and behaviours thus leading to the achievement of the desired goals (Mat, 2008)

1.3 Contextual perspective

Public universities in Kenya are operating in highly competitive environment locally and globally and this call for management styles that enhance staff retention in order to gain competitive advantage. There are major issues facing these institutions including massification of higher education without commensurate increase in staff. This has created disillusionment among the staff due to heavy workload. The situation is compounded by poor remuneration that is given to the academic staff compared to their colleagues in the public and private sector. Brain drain and brain in drain has resulted to these universities losing the already few staff and hence raising capacity concerns. Majority of academic staff sent abroad for further studies do not return (GOK, 2006). In these institutions, leadership comprises the Vice Chancellors and their deputies down to the Chairmen of Departments who act as the line managers. The role of these leaders in employee retention is crucial since literature indicates that employee leave leaders and not organizations (Beardwell, 2007)

1.4 Statement of the problem

The area of academic staff retention has not been widely studied since it tends to be subsumed in brain drain studies. The few studies available locally (Tetty, 2006; Tetty, 2009; Kipkebutt, 2010) indicate that academic staff retention is a pertinent issue which has been made worse by the double intake of students in the 2011/2012 academic year.

The staff student ratios in these universities are 1:24 and in others universities going upto 1:35 as opposed to the internationally accepted ratio of 1:15. The public universities Inspection Committees Report (GOK,2006) indicates that staff who leave for further studies abroad do not return .Studies such as Waswa *et.al.*, (2008) has established that leadership style had contributed to industrial actions in public universities in Kenya due to lack of adequate communication and lack of participatory decision making. In light of the staff retention issues and the challenge of leadership the objective of this paper was to establish the influence of leadership style on academic staff retention in public universities in Kenya.

2.0 Literature review

According to Northouse (2010) some researchers conceptualize leadership from the trait aspect; which means a leader has a set of certain characteristics which make him/her a leader; for others, it is the behaviour of the leader which enables him/her to accomplish the goals of the institution. Northouse further argues that for some theorists, leadership is a relationship between the leader and followers in terms of power; whereas some theorists view leadership from the leader's capacity with respect to the skill and knowledge aspect

2.1 Theoretical review

a. The trait theory

The trait theory is one of the systematic attempts to study leadership (Northouse,1997). It is one of the early efforts to understand leadership process that focuses on the leaders personal traits The most noticeable components of this theory are that successful leaders all over the world and through out history are born with innate qualities such as personality traits, social traits, ability traits and physical traits The groupings of leadership traits vary from one scholar to another. Stodgil (1948) outlines eight traits namely intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence and sociability in his first survey. The leadership traits and characteristics have been clearly categorized by Jago (1982) and Daft (199) by dividing them into four groups namely personality, social, ability and physical traits (Mat, 2008).The theory is very useful to differentiate the leaders from followers, effective from ineffective leaders and the higher echelon from the lower echelon leaders. The theory focuses exclusively on the role of the leader in leadership and hence has been able to provide a deeper and more intricate understanding of how the leader and his or her personality are related to the leadership process (Mat, 2008).

Trait theory is criticized for the various reasons. The most substantial problem is that even though for decades numerous researches on trait theory have been conducted, there is no standard list of traits introduced which can be used to define the leadership effectiveness. Second failure is the inability of the trait theory to limit itself to a list of traits. Thirdly, it is linked to the assumption that a leader is born, if a person have certain traits, he is a leader. In this theory the determination of leadership effectiveness is solely dependent on the list of trait and not on the situation. This makes it difficult to predict leadership effectiveness based on the pre-defined list of traits in different situations (Mat, 2008).

b. Theory X and Theory Y

The proponent of this theory is MC Gregor (1966). This theory explains two conflicting observations of people at work that will influence management style. The managers are perceived to follow either view of their workforce. Theory X is perceived as a traditional view of direction and control. Theory Y involves a more self directed workforce that takes an interest in the goals of their organization and incorporates some of their own goals into these. Theory X assumes that the average person dislikes work and will avoid it unless directly supervised, the employees must be coerced, controlled and directed to ensure the organizational objectives are met; the threat of punishment must exist within an organization and they prefer to be managed this way to avoid responsibility. It also assumes that people are relatively un ambitious and their prime driving force is the desire for security (Mat, 2008).On the other hand Theory Y is the extreme opposite and perceives employees to be motivated, keen to take greater accountability and apply both self-control and direction: the employees will conditions work towards organizational objectives and that commitment will in itself be rewarded for so doing. The employees will exercise their thoughts and imagination in their jobs if given the chance and this will give an opportunity for greater productivity.

Theory Y assumes that the common human being will, under the acceptable conditions, not only take responsibility but also look for more, and the lack of ambition and the qualities of Theory X are no innate human characteristics but learned in working environments that suffocate or do not promote theory Y behaviours (Okumbe,1998) McGregor postulated that understanding the assumptions by which managers operate helps leaders become more effective in their workplace which in turn impacts on their employees(Thrush, 2012). Theory X is criticized for its negative view about people and for its autocratic approach in enforcing organizational standards (Okumbe,1998)

A leadership style refers to a particular behaviour applied by a leader to motivate his or her subordinates to achieve the objectives of the organization. According to Okumbe (1998) the pioneering work on leadership conducted at the University of Iowa in 1993 investigated the impact of the three leadership style namely democratic, autocratic and laissez faire on the behaviour of group members. The pioneering work on leadership conducted at the University of IOWA 1938 investigated the impact of these three leadership styles on the behaviour of group members. The democratic also Known as participative or consultative decentralize power and authority. Decisions are made through consultations. Autocratic leadership style also Known as authoritative centralizes power, authority and decision making. In the laizzes faire case the leader tends to avoid power and authority, the leaders depends largely on the group to establish goals and means of achieving progress and success. Thrush (2012) argues that this is an impoverished style, illustrated by low concern for task and low concern for people

2.2 Role of Leadership Style on Staff Retention

One of the critical roles of management is to create a work environment that will endear the organization to employees. It also includes influencing these employees' decision to be committed and remain with the organization even when other job opportunities exist outside the organization (Michael, 2008). Beard well (2007) observes that the role of leadership and a supervisor is crucial in staff retention, and argues that employees leave managers not companies.

According to Taylor (2004), organizations can no longer afford to leave the responsibility for keeping well – performing employees in the hands of the HR Department. Responsibility and accountability for retaining talent need to move out to the front lines and into the hands of leaders. Leaders and their skill in building a climate of retention, a culture that speaks to employees in a way that encourages them to stay, will be an organization's best defense against unwanted turnover. Leaders are therefore the secret weapon in keeping valued talent longer. A two way communication is regarded as a core management competency and a key management responsibility. Leaders should adopt a style that would establish and confirm their leadership authority by means of appearing competent and trustworthy. Effective leaders should guide members in a manner that allows them to contribute to the achievement of the group' overall goal (Mat, 2008).

Employees are more likely to remain with an organization if they belief that their managers shows interest and concern for them, if they know what is expected of them, if they are given a role that fits their capabilities and if they receive regular positive feedback and recognition. The quality of relationship an employee has with his or her immediate managers elongates employee stay in an organization (Ferreira, 2007 cited in Michael, 2008). Gwavuya (2011) affirms that incompetent leadership results in poor employee performance, high stress, low job commitment, low job satisfaction and turnover intent. Research conducted on the state of South African Training industry indicated that management style was the most prominent retention factor in South Africa (Netswera, 2005). Sherman etal (2006) found in their research that majority of the employees in organizations surveyed planned to remain with their organizations at least for the next five years because of the prevailing culture of management care. Chew (2004) observed that leadership behaviour has a positive influence on organizational commitment and turnover intention. Muindi (2011) established that leadership style, specifically lack of involvement in decision making and inadequate communication were some of the issues that caused dissatisfaction of academic staff University of Nairobi. Therefore literature indicates that leadership style is crucial in staff retention.

3.0 Methodology

This study was designed to establish the influence of leadership style on academic staff retention in Kenyan public universities. The target population was 4967 academic staff in the seven fully fledged public universities.

A sample of 496 which is approximately 10% of the population was used to collect the necessary data. The researcher used a self administered questionnaire with Likert scale questions ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire also had open ended items.

3.1 Data analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 16.0. Descriptive analysis using percentages and Simple regression analysis was used for analysis of the data. Statistical significance was determined based upon a significance level of 0.05.

4.0 Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analysis of a five point Likert scale (5 =strongly Agree, to 1=strongly disagree) which was used to find out the influence of leadership style on employee retention showed that majority 65% agreed that leadership contributes to the overall effectiveness of the organization which includes ability to retain staff. This supports the argument that leaders have a pivotal role to play in staff retention. On average (56.4%) indicated that the leadership in their institutions does not respond to staff issues promptly and a significant percentage (46.9%) disagreed that staff were involved in decision making compared to (33.1 %) who agreed that staff were involved. Further a significant number (46.3%) disagreed that the leaders communicated regularly on matters important to them against (31.7%) who agreed that there was regular communication. In addition 56% indicated that the leadership style commonly practiced in their institutions was autocratic tallying with Waswa *et.al.*,(2008) observations on autocracy exercised in these institutions especially when issues escalate to industrial action.

4.1 Regression analysis

The model tested was as follows

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon \quad \text{where:-}$$

Y= represents the dependent variable, academic staff retention measured using intention to leave,

B_0 = constant

X_1 = represents leadership style index

ε =error term

β_1 = the regression coefficient

Simple regression analysis (enter method) was used to test the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The model analysis of variance indicates that it is valid and significant since (F (1,542) = 192.927, P<0.001) hence there is a significant linear relationship between leadership style and intention to leave with a standardized coefficients $\beta = -0.512$, P< 0.001. The R square is 0.263 which means that 26% of the variation in the independent variable can be explained by leadership style. The fitted model is as follows;

$$Y = - 0.512$$

This means that leadership style is significantly and negatively influencing intention to leave in public universities in Kenya. It also means that an increase of one unit of Leadership style index decrease Y by 0.512.

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study this research concluded that leadership style influences academic staff retention in Kenyan public universities. There was an inverse relationship between leadership style and intention to leave. Intention to leave is the measure commonly used in studies to assess turnover and retention. When leadership style is unfavourable intention to leave increases and when it is favorable intention to leave decreases, hence enhancing staff retention. This study also concluded that the leadership practiced by most of the leaders in these institutions was not favorable for retention. From the written responses, the study concluded that the academic staff were not adequately involved in decision making and regular communication was lacking. Similarly the study also concluded that staff issues were no addressed promptly.

5.1 Recommendation

This study brought out the critical role of leadership and leadership style in retention of the academic staff in public universities in Kenya. It is recommended that the leadership in these institutions embrace favourable leadership practices to enhance retention of academic staff in their institutions since leaders have an influence on plethora of organizational factors which affect retention.

A lesson for the universities regarding leadership style pertains to the area of involvement of staff in decision making and communicating regularly. Providing more avenues for participation in decision making and regular communication will enable the staff to give their inputs in policies and goals of the organization. Further it will open means of identifying issues affecting staff that if left unattended may influence them to leave. The leaders should be responsive to staff issues since responding to staff issues promptly shows that the leaders care and this engender intention to stay longer in the organization. Academic staff should be recognized as a critical resource that can significantly contribute to these institutions ability to compete locally and globally.

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