

Leadership Skills in ODL: Perceptions of Lecturers at Masvingo Zimbabwe Open University

By

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Abstract

Distance and Open education is a kind of constantly evolving business which needs effective leaders. Leadership is known for its unique responsibility for people. In managing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes group activities are required and the emergence of a leader becomes imminent. People work effectively where there is a leader to guide them and keep them motivated on their way to success. As much as it is necessary to have leaders in ODL, it is also essential that leaders have the right qualities and skills. To inspire one's workers in ODL there are certain things a leader must be, know and perform. A case study was conducted at Masvingo Zimbabwe Open University to investigate worker/lecturer opinions on what makes an effective leader in an ODL institution. One general opinion expressed by participants was that good leadership requires deep human qualities such as fairness and that good leaders in ODL are an enabling force helping institutions and people to perform and develop. Some lecturers felt that effective leaders were aggressive evolutionists who introduce shifts according to student needs. The study recommended that leaders in ODL should continue to study and upgrade their qualities.

Keywords: *Leader, Open and distance learning, leadership*

1. Background of the Study

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe. It was established on 1st March 1999, through an act of Parliament, Chapter 25:20. Initially the University operated as the Centre of Distance education at the University of Zimbabwe before its transformation to the University College of Distance Education. After this transformation, ZOU was granted its own charter to operate as a fully fledged university. It is the largest University in the country. At ZOU there are four faculties offering services in ODL to the nation and to students beyond Zimbabwe borders. The faculties are; the faculty of Arts and Education, Faculty of Commerce and Law, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences and Faculty of Science and Technology. In each faculty there are departments. For instance, in the Faculty of Education there are the departments of Education, Arts, and Humanities. Most ZOU students are drawn from ten regions of Zimbabwe as well the virtual Region which caters for students outside Zimbabwe.

For ODL to run smoothly and effectively there is need for clearly defined levels of leadership. Generally speaking, leaders establish direction by developing a vision of the future and aligning people by communicating this vision and inspiring them to overcome hurdles (Robbins 2003).

Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (Burns, 1978). There are many interpretations to the concept of leadership. For instance some people believe that leadership is about the first. Thus a leader is interpreted as someone who sets direction and influences others to follow (McNamara 2008). Leaders may be viewed as autocratic, laissez-faire or democratic.

At ZOU there are several levels of leadership to facilitate Open and Distance learning. For instance, heading each faculty is a Dean. A chairperson leads a department. Then below the chairperson, is a programme leader. For instance in the department of Education there are programme leaders of the Bachelor in Education, Early Childhood Development (BEDECD), Diploma in Primary Education (DIPED) and the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Below the programme leaders, there are the regional departmental coordinators in education, commerce, physical education, psychology and nursing departments, just to mention a few. Programme co-coordinators run the academic departments at regional centres. They head a group of part-time tutors as well as the student body. In addition, at each regional campus there are the regional and deputy regional directors who lead academic and non-academic staff and the ODL students. Thus at ZOU levels of leadership are many and varied but in all cases, some appropriate leadership attributes and skills are needed in trying to accomplish the ZOU vision in its endeavor in offering open and distance learning (ODL) especially in these modern times when there are many rapid technological and socio-economic developments which are taking place and often have a bearing on ODL. It was against this background that the study was conducted.

The Statement of the Problem

The study was guided by the following searching question in the mind of the researchers, “What are the skills and qualities that make an effective leader in ODL institutions?”

Research Questions

- Which leadership skills and attributes inspire other people and students in ODL?
- Which leadership skills may contribute to failure and criticism in ODL?
- What are the barriers in trying to lead co-workers and students in ODL?
- What are the factors that help one lead more effectively?

2. Research Methodology

The research employed the descriptive survey design. The researchers chose this method as it allowed lecturers to express their opinions on what they viewed as the desirable and undesirable leadership skills and qualities in Open and Distance Learning. The descriptive design was viewed as appropriate because it describes what we see over and beyond. Babbie (1997) and Leedy (1997) argue that surveys are the best design to adopt where perceptions, views and beliefs of the subjects are sought.

Sample

The target population were all lecturers at Zimbabwe Open University at the Masvingo Regional Campus. The lecturers are the regional departmental coordinators. Nine regional department coordinators participated in the study. Two of the lecturers who were on leave did not take part in the study.

Instruments

In the study, self-administered questionnaires were used. The questionnaire had a section with statements on some characteristics and skills leaders should have and the lecturers were requested to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, making their choices on Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral and Disagree and Strongly Disagree continuum. In addition there were some open-ended questions in the second section of the questionnaire which participants were expected to answer. Self administration of the questionnaire by the researchers ensured a hundred percent return of the instrument. A structured interview schedule was also used to get opinions of three lectures on skills and qualities desirable and undesirable in leaders in ODL and on barriers to effective leadership in ODL. By using the questionnaire, the respondents were not influenced by the presence of the researcher. The interview allowed the researchers to probe adequate responses and the use of these two instruments enhanced some methodology triangulation and demerits of the use of one instrument could be overcome through the use of another instrument.

Limitations

The study was just a case study of the Masvingo regional campus and so its findings are not generalisable to other ZOU regional campuses. In addition the sample was rather small.

3. Conceptual Framework

The Concept Leader

There are many diverse definitions of the word leader. Fielder in Kast and Rosenweig (1979: 322-3), defines a leader as the individual in the group given the task of directing and co-ordinating task-relevant group activities. Thus a leader can be viewed as a person who influences a group of people towards the achievement of a goal (www.vtaide.com/gleanings/leader.htm). A leader is the inspiration and direction of the action. According to Allen Deborah quoted in <http://wichita.kumc.edu/fem/documents/> a leader is someone who can visualize a better world in the future and is able to convince others to join him or her on the journey.

The concept Leadership

According to Shead in www.leadership501.com leadership the concept leadership can be defined according to gears of leadership. Leadership is the activity of leading and the ability to lead. So it is about what activity one does rather than a position one holds. Leadership is defined as the process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task. In agreement with this Northouse (2007:3) says leadership is a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent. So the ideas of activity, ability and social influence all relate to the concept of leadership. Leadership is mostly about behavior. It is influence, nothing less than that.

Factors of leadership

There are four factors of leaders identified by en. [Wikipedia.org/wiki/leadership](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/leadership) namely the leader, followers, communication and situation.

Leader

The person in the position of leadership should have an honest understanding of who they are, what they know and what they can do. A leader should be able to convince workers under them that they are worthy of being followed.

Followers

Followers differ in a variety of ways. Different followers require different leader styles. Consequently it is critical for a leader to know their people such as their personality, their needs and expectations, among other things.

Communication

In any work environment there is a two-way communication. It can be non-verbal or verbal. For instance setting a good example by the leader is non-verbal while many other messages and decisions are made verbally.

Situation

Situation is inevitably the other factor of leadership. Many situations present themselves to the leadership. Different situations usually need to be handled differently and these require several skills and characteristics in the leader.

Leadership Styles

Style refers to a leader's behavior which is the result of the philosophy personality and experience of the leader.

Authoritarian or Autocratic style

According to, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, all decision making powers are centralized in the authoritarian leader. Leaders with this style do not entertain any suggestions or even initiatives from subordinates. Its main merit is that it permits quick decision making as unilateral decisions are made.

The democratic or Participative style

This style of leadership favors decision making by the group. Instructions are given after consulting with the group. It is also known as the comrade level of leadership. With this style it is possible to win co-operation of the group and motivation level of the group can be raised. However decision making can be winding.

Laissez-faire or free reign style

Practically, with the free-reign style, the leader abandons her\his position and so leaves the group entirely to itself and allows maximum freedom to one's subordinates. Lack of direction or chaos prevails. This style is also known as the un-leader level of leadership.

Toxic Leadership

Is one who abuses the leader -follower relationship and may end up leaving an organization in a more deplorable condition than when s/he first found them.

Narcissistic Style

This style is characterized by high levels of loving oneself.

Supportive Style

According to House and Mitchell (1974) this style of leadership supports the needs of the follower and has concern for the welfare of the subordinates. This style creates a friendly environment. With this style it is possible to increase follower self-esteem and make the job more interesting.

Achievement oriented style

It is characterized by the setting of challenging goals by the leader for the purposes of self –improvement and improving work.

In practical terms a single leader has some characteristics of more than one leadership style although traits of one style maybe more prominent than the other. Also, different situations in a work environment call for different styles.

Theories of Leadership

Theories are ways to explain how people become leaders. The Bass Theory of Leadership provides three theories of leadership namely the Trait, The Process Leadership theories and The Great Events Theory.

The Trait Theory

Some personality traits may lead naturally into leadership roles. Jago (1992) says some people have traits that can influence action and leaders are born rather than made. Skills, knowledge and attributes make the leader. So leadership is considered as something residing in people.

The Transformational or Process Leadership

The basis of this theory is that people can choose to become leaders and they can develop leadership skills. Consequently it is possible for people to apply their leadership knowledge and skills.

The Great Events Theory

A crisis or important event may cause a person to rise to the occasion which brings out extraordinary leadership qualities in an ordinary person. In real life situations, leaders display a combination of these theories, that is, some natural tendency and that one can learn some of the skills that are needed.

Some Responsibilities of leaders

In order too be effective leaders ought to perform numerous responsibilities which include; seeing, believing and conveying the mission of the organization, staying focused on the mission, facilitating activities and accomplishment of goals, giving advice, empowering her or his sub-ordinates, communicating well, listening, unloading their pride and practising ethical leadership,(www.indiana.edu/mkdplist/mysiteleadership, Sharpening your skills as an effective and visionary leader).

Some Barriers to being a leader

Barriers include; lack of natural skills, lack of desire, lack of education about effective leadership methods, lack of social support and time, unwillingness to take the risk, underestimating one`s impact as a leader on colleagues and people, an environment that is discriminatory and devoid of common sense and making unpopular decisions in an organization.

(http://Wichita.kumc.edu/fem/documents/ten%20) Ten questions about leadership.

What makes people want to follow a leader?

Answers to this question would inevitably touch on leader types or styles, on leader traits, skills and what they know. In a nutshell, people want to follow those they respect, those with a clear sense of direction who are able to convey a strong vision of the future. Leaders who display ethical type of leadership fairly easily get good following as the world is more transparent and connected than ever before and leader actions and philosophies of organization are scrutinized by general public and media as never before. Thus, leadership is mostly about behavior. Good leadership in modern times more importantly requires right attitudes and behavior. Good leaders develop through a never ending process of self-study, education, training and experience (Jago 1982).

4. Data Presentation and Discussion

Table 1: Lecturers’ Responses to statements on leadership skills and qualities

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1.A good leader is innovative	9	0	0
2.An effective leader has a vision	9	0	0
3.A good leader is flexible	8	0	1
4.S/he adapts easily to change	7	0	2
5.S/he has long term plans	9	0	0
6.S/he contributes in research	8	0	1
7.S/he is less directing	7	2	0
8.An effective leader is motivating	8	0	1
9.S/he directs new initiatives in others	7	1	1
10.Has ability to operate within political, symbolic structural and human resources framework	9	0	0
11.Has the ability to reinvent one`s skills and abilities	4	2	2
12.S/he is an enabling force helping people and institutions to perform and develop	9	0	0
13.S/he is a risk-taker	7	1	1
14.S/he is fiscally conservative	3	3	3
15.S/he is ruthless about improvement	4	1	4

16.Faces and solves problems	9	0	0
17.S/he is truly humble	8	1	0
18.S/he is an aggressive evolutionist who introduces shifts according to students needs	7	0	2
19.They respect those who make the show work	9	0	0
20.They communicate constantly	9	0	0
21.They communicate clearly	9	0	0
22.They communicate concisely	9	0	0
23.S/he is ethical	8	0	1
24.S/he is proactive	8	0	1
25.They learn from others	9	0	0
26.S/he emphasizes good qualities in others	8	0	1
27.S/he is a role model	9	0	0
28.Keeps his/her co-worker/student informed	9	0	0
29.Is receptive to new ideas	9	0	0
30.Is fair	9	0	0
31.Focuses on betterment of the group not just individuals	9	0	0
32.Is totally unbiased	9	0	0
33.Is provider of constructive feedback	9	0	0
34.Moves with technological advancement	9	0	0

All the nine questionnaires were filled out and there was 100% response to each of the thirty-four statements. All responses indicated as ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ were collapsed into the ‘agree’ column and the same was done with the two levels of disagreement.

Which are the qualities necessary in leaders in ODL?

Table 1 depicts that co – workers and students in ODL institutions all need respect, so naturally those, who make the show work also appreciate respect. Maybe all the nine lectures agreed that a good leader should respect those who make the show work because such respect naturally motivates those who participate outstandingly and this can further increase their motivation to do even more and better. Constant, clear and concise communication was deemed a good quality for ODL leaders by all the nine lecturers. This could be attributed to the fact that communication is critical in any institution. Communicating constantly clearly, concisely, is critical, because co – workers need information quickly for them to act on it meaningfully and to do so to the benefit of co – workers and students in ODL. To further support that opinion all the lecturers agreed that an effective leader in ODL keeps co – workers and students informed and that he / she is a provider of constant feedback. All the nine lecturers agreed with the statement that effective ODL leaders learn from others. May be this general opinion could be attributed to the thinking that no man knows everything especially in this day and age where there is explosion of knowledge and so one is bound to learn from others. Just closely related to the need to have the ability to learn from others is the ability to be receptive to new ideas to learn from others. That a leader in ODL is role model was a statement agreed to by all lectures. This is quite in line with a philosophy which says, “No man is fit to command another that cannot command himself.”

Nothing is constant in this world and so since change is inevitable it is paramount for leaders in ODL to be receptive to new ideas. Lecturers’ views were the same on the statement that leaders in ODL should move with technological advancement. This quality can greatly contribute to timeous technology linked changes that may take place at a campus or in a department.

Again all the nine lectures viewed the ability to be fair as critical to leaders in ODL. There are other two statements which are also related to fairness namely; that a good leader in ODL should focus on the

betterment of the group and not just individuals and that they should not be biased, which were agreed to by all lecturers. Fairness with co-workers and students promotes harmonious relationships and motives all. So sixteen qualities and skills were clearly viewed by lecturers as qualities and skills people look for in ODL and these opinions support Lifestyle Lounge (<http://www.lifestyle.iloveindia.com/lounge/effective-leadership.qualities-and.3050.html>) who says that being totally unbiased, being receptive to new ideas and effective communication are effective leadership qualities and skills. Being flexible, contributing to research, having the ability to motivate others, being truly humble, ethical, proactive and having the ability to emphasise good qualities in others were all viewed by eight lecturers in each case as important skills and qualities of leaders in ODL. Being flexible is critical in that, ODL, come across many different situations in which they have to make decisions, they cannot be rigid as different situations may demand different ways of dealing with them. Research is an important tool in development, so a good leader should partake in research work as this opens their understanding of phenomena in ODL set ups, so co-workers and students need some energizers to keep them going so it is critical to have the skill to motivate them. Being ethical was also viewed as an important quality by lecturers. In modern times ethics is an important issue as it is concerned with moral correctness. Ethics are guide lines for right action. This is supported by <http://www.seul.org.uk> leadership defined, which says today ethical leadership is more important than ever and the world is more transparent and connected than it has ever been.

The following skills and attributes:

- Being less directing
 - Ability to direct new initiatives in others
 - Being a risk taker
 - Being an aggressive evolutionist who introduces shifts according to students' needs
- were each viewed as important skills and qualities by seven out of nine lecturers otherwise the other two in each case were either neutral or disagreed. May be the differences in opinions could be attributed to the type of leadership one views as the ideal. Those who agreed that a leader should be less directing might be those preferring democratic type of leadership. Differences in opinions may also be attributed to the view that different situations call different leadership styles, (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/leadership). Participants' opinions were clearly divided on the following statements: leader has the ability to reinvent one's skills and abilities (Four agreed, 2 were neutral and 2 disagreed). Differences in opinions might be attributed to theories that influence some people's thinking, like those who believe much in the trait theory may believe that one cannot reinvent skills or qualities as these are inborn.

The statement that an effective leader is fiscally conservative was agreed to by three participants while three were neutral and three disagreed. Differences in opinions could be influenced by respondents' knowledge on the amounts of public revenue usually available or some past experiences on the effects of being fiscally conservative in an ODL institution. Those who were neutral might have been influenced by lack of knowledge on the expenditure of public monies. However interview data confirmed questionnaire data as the views on some undesirable qualities of leaders in ODL were really a contrast of the majority of the qualities viewed as the positive ones.

Interview Data

1) Which leadership skills may contribute to failure?

The responses by three lecturers to this question are tabulated in table 2.

Table 2 Undesirable Leadership Characteristics stated by lecturers

Undesirable Characteristic/s	Frequency
Dictating	3
Bias / Unfair	3
Not delegating duties / hazy	3
Retaining critical information	2
Politically motivated	1
Unethical	3
Traditional	1
Insecure	1
Not being aware of nitty – gritty of the work that co – workers / students should do	3

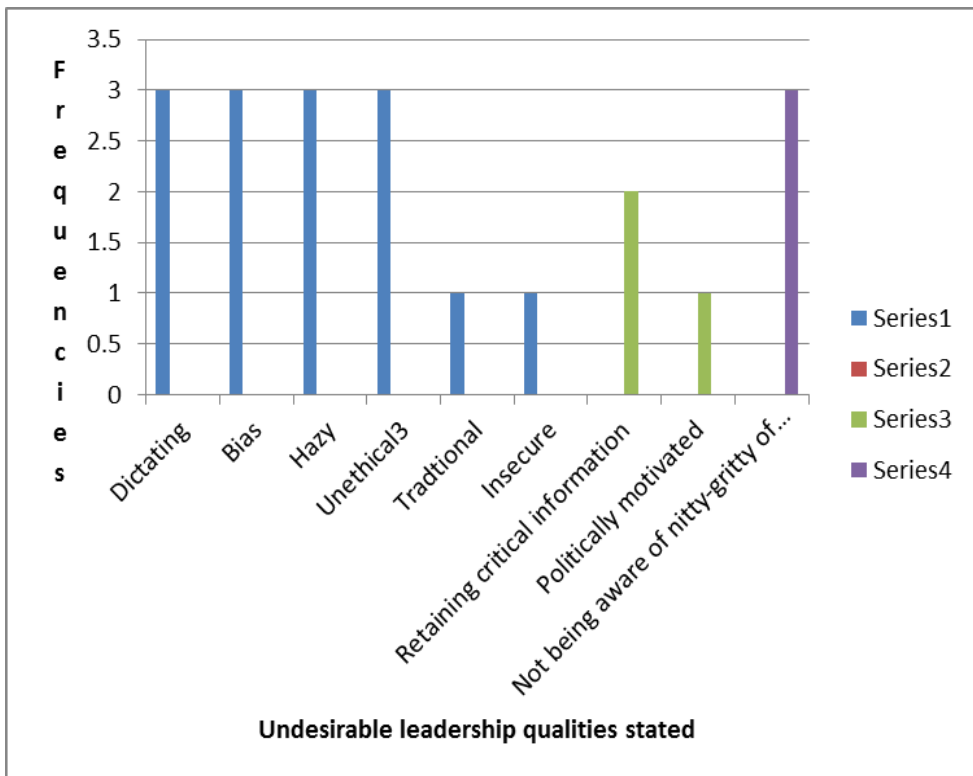


Fig 1. Lecturers' views on desirable leadership qualities

From the above table and graph, being unfair was stated by all three lecturers who were interviewed to give their minds on the qualities that may contribute to failure and criticism in ODL. Retaining critical information was also indicated as an undesirable quality. Being unethical was stated as another characteristic that is undesirable by all the three. Dictating what to do to co - workers and students and not being knowledgeable about what co – workers and students should do was viewed by three lecturers as an undesirable characteristics in leaders in ODL. Being lazy and insecure were given as undesirable

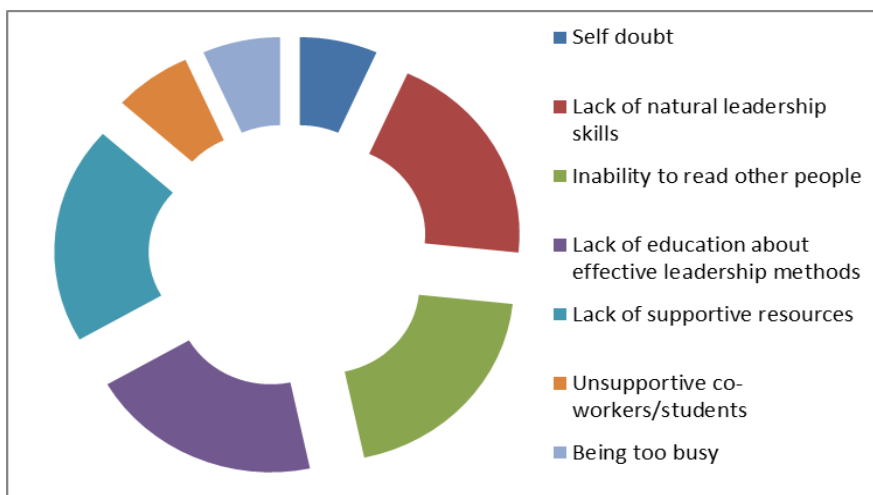
characteristics of ODL leaders. Some of these responses link clearly with lecturer responses to the questionnaire because opposite traits such as being ethical, fair were responded to as being desirable.

What are the barriers in trying to lead effectively in ODL?

Table 3 Barriers in trying to lead effectively in ODL

Given Factors	No. of Responses
Self doubt	1
Lack of natural leadership skills	3
Inability to read other people	3
Lack of education about effective leadership methods	3
Lack of supportive resources	3
Unsupportive co-workers/students	1
Being too busy	1

Fig. 2 Stated barriers in trying to lead effectively in ODL



The opinions of the three lecturers were as given in the above table. So the array of barriers to being effective leaders, relate at times to the characteristics of a leader, to the people s/he works with and the environment in which s/he operates.

5. Conclusion

There are several desirable skills and qualities leaders in ODL should have according to the lecturers at ZOU, Masvingo Campus. Some of those on the top list are; having the ability to be innovative, having good understanding of concept ODL and being ethical. Leaders in ODL actually should have such skills and qualities as change is a norm in any ODL settings. It is also rational for leaders in ODL to have a good grasp of the essence of ODL as being open and distant are the key characteristics of ODL. One needs to be crystal clear about what ODL is, its goals and objectives and the nature of factors influencing its success and failures. Undoubtedly, leaders in ought to be ethical in all they do for them to win hearts of those whom they lead. According to the lecturers being unfair, failing to communicate effectively and being traditional are some of the undesirable characteristics of leaders in ODL. These can easily hinder progress in ODL activities. In addition, it would seem that some personal, institutional and student factors are a hindrance to effective leadership in ODL.

6. Recommendations

The researchers recommend the following :

- Attending diplomacy training by ZOU leaders who operate at different levels
- Improvement in transparency
- Workshops and training relevant to perceived needs of leaders in ODL
- Skills Renewal Workshop fairly frequently
- Further research linked to this study

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