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Some Reflections on Leadership and Governance of Higher Education Institutions

This chapter examines the various traits that constitute good management and leadership. I have decided to write it using my experience over the many years of public involvement. I have been in four positions of human interaction and development: a lecturer, a college deputy principal and then principal, a VC and a director-general and a chairman. In all these positions, there were definite demands that were necessary in order to succeed. Each rank was unique and needed continuous management traits. I started engaging in leadership at an early age and continued to practise it without knowing. My primary and secondary school days and, finally, the university level, all gave me enough practical experience.

Leadership is not quite the same as management. They are different. Each one calls for different approaches as they both impact on human beings. I learnt the processes of being humane in both vocations. Indeed, they overlap and become complementary. Leadership in my view calls for proper discharge of responsibilities and well-balanced judgement of issues.

A leader would direct, influence, guide and be visionary. He/she follows through a certain route in order to achieve a goal. In the academia world a chairman of a department, Vice-Chancellor or rector is not necessarily a leader but an individual who can influence decisions brought up by staff. He/she has to guide, arbitrate and come to a consensus on issues that affect the institution.

The person is essentially a public relations leader who should have tremendous influential authority. For example, when Senates meet, they expect leadership and guidance. But many times members could come up with totally different agenda and put the chairman, who is normally the VC, into disarray. This is the time when leadership qualities are put to test. Tempers may rise; name-calling ensues but the Vice-Chancellor who is the chair must be able to control the meeting and give direction. Every Senate member considers him/herself an expert in a certain area and would always want to portray this character.

The chair, therefore, has to have the capacity, audacity, authority and vision to lead the otherwise heterogeneous scholars who are competent in their own areas of expertise. They call for respect but must be managed. In such circumstances, the chair may be intimidated, but must have the capacity to subdue the embarrassment. Leadership is manifested more to senior staff than perhaps to students. Students are more easily managed than led. Their reasoning capacity is highly influenced by circumstances and mob-psychology, on specific issues. They need managers.

A leader in a church congregation, a community, a union, a women group, a youth group, a political rally is always assertive and commandeering. The issues discussed in this scenario are generally predetermined. One does not get diverse views from the basic objects of the congregation. Meetings could be called to pass on messages or facts to the members.

Take the example of former Libyan president, Muammar Ghaddaffi, who preferred to be called a Leader of the People of Libya and led them for over 40 years is a good example to demonstrate the virtue of leadership. Despite his unprecedented/ excessive stay at the helm, Muammar gave the people of Libya certain confidence to have been allowed to stay in power that long. He led his people and provided them with basic facilities and fulfilled their needs.

I recall my last visit to Libya and in particular Sirte City, the birthplace of the late Muammar Ghaddaffi. I actually went round the city and noticed a big difference in the standard of living between the residents there and other African countries. They were provided with the basic needs like health services, water, good feeder roads, affordable food and electricity supply. I would be surprised to have an African country with these kinds of facilities provided to its ordinary citizens! They expected him to lead, provide the basics and give guidance. Hence, he was so revered. There are numerous examples of leadership which demonstrate the role that one plays to ensure a satisfied group of employees.

Good leadership, on the other hand, includes the following aspects:

- Visionary – frame the organization character and pursue it;
- Planning and generating potential solutions to the issues at hand;
- Deciding and making a commitment to a course of action;
- Explaining the rationale that led to this commitment and presenting the legitimate expectations;
- Executing the objectives to realization;
- Continuous evaluation of the progress with modifications as necessary;
- Integrity and accountability;
- Responsive public relations;
- Good sense of time management.

Management, on the other hand, is when one basically directs events. As a director-general of NEMA, for example, I had to manage the affairs of the environment and give orders. I had a duty to direct the environmental offenders to stop the vice. It was NEMA's duty as stipulated in the EMCA 1999 Act that we ensured all Kenyans were entitled to a clean and healthy environment. It was my responsibility to articulate and enforce the laws.

As a Vice-Chancellor, I also had a group of people to manage and to lead others. By and large, Vice-Chancellors or rectors manage and direct both staff and students. They may at times have to dictate.

For example, the kind of problems which Vice-Chancellors faced in the 1980s and 1990s did not allow much room for intelligent negotiations. The public universities were faced with numerous student strikes that did not allow for proper management. This circumstance called for either firm leadership or continuous university closures. This did not mean total authoritarian manoeuvres, but firm decision-making against the tides. As a Vice-Chancellor, therefore, I played the role of both a manager and leader through the university management board and Senate, and ensured continuous briefing of the Council.

Students appreciate facts, the truth, and fulfilled promises. I scored high on being firm if I knew I could not meet an obligation or promise. Luckily, I delivered virtually most of the promises that I had made and on time. This was being true to my staff and student community. I was known to fulfil promises and report back accordingly. However, my negative responses on many requests were equally respected, particularly when I knew I could not fulfil the demands. That was what I considered proper management.

The idea of managers fulfilling promises is rare because of perceived further consultations. What frustrates decision-making in many institutions is the notion that one has to make further consultations before one decides to honour the requests. Such delays leave room for speculations, rumours and uncertainty. The affected group becomes dissatisfied and disillusioned.

Leadership and management are complementary in their roles. There were situations in my career when I could make decisions for the benefit of the affected people. I encountered several situations that demanded action first and justification later. Sometimes, constructive reason on an issue would not be forthcoming and I would detect a danger looming due to delayed action. Management in many cases is orderly and negotiated. I never got stressed managing a team of people as long as we could communicate and exchange ideas.

Constructive debates yield productive results. This is the basic requirement of a good manager. A good manager can criticize staff and should also be positive and ready to receive and utilize constructive criticisms.

A combination of a good manager and a good leader is an imperative quality for running institutions in any country. There are several hidden qualities which make

one a good manager or a good leader. A comparison between good leadership and good management has been researched by scholars who have published papers.

Leadership is service that seeks to meet the needs of a group of people by performing needed functions. Sometimes strong directive power of effective leadership is needed, such as when a group has lost its sense of direction or purpose. With another group, or at another time when the group is functioning well in its relationship and has its directions clear, non-directive styles of leadership are needed. Sometimes, the group needs to be encouraged and supported; at other times it may need to be oriented leadership serving the need of the group (Keating, 1982: 13)

Leadership, therefore, seeks to be more of service rather than dominate. It encourages others and mentors them. It does not exploit but respects them. It renders maximum service with a sense of unswerving and unceasing absorption of a belief. A leader brings out the best in people, makes them feel wanted and can be relied on. They accept criticisms and change positively according to circumstances. He /she must be a team leader, a team player, a coach and an inspirer. There are a number of leadership characteristics which are discussed by other scholars. The clusters of traits for leadership fall under the following categories:

- Capacity (intelligence, alertness, verbal facility, originality, judgement);
- Achievement (scholarship, knowledge, accomplishments);
- Responsibility (dependability, initiative, persistence, aggressiveness, self-confidence, desire to excel);
- Participation (activity, sociability, co-operation, adaptability, humour);
- Situation (mental ability, skills, needs and interests of followers, objectives to be achieved and tasks to be performed).

Certain general qualities in leadership such as courage, fortitude and conviction are a part of the list given above. Each individual in leadership may have all or some of the characteristics mentioned. In any case, I cannot decipher or identify which qualities I acquired. But from the role I played in the institutions I headed, I ranked well in many.

The two qualities, among many, that I consider vital for leadership are participation and ownership of processes. Workers enjoy identifying themselves with a venture or undertaking. They feel proud and could readily defend the new undertaking with dignity when and if it succeeds. Teamwork in any organization is important. Results are achieved and colleagues support the new ideas.

Bold stand and firmness also contribute to good leadership and management. Indecisive chief executives run into risks of dividing those they lead. I took firm positions in whatever issues I considered important. I could at times be torn between uncertainties, but I would consider views from both divides and steer the right decision to finality. This did not mean that I was correct in some matters, far from the truth.

I recall incidences where I rushed into making decisions but had to withdraw the verdict. This was not, however, a common occurrence. I always reflected over issues. The best decisions I took were the ones where I occasionally consulted with senior colleagues and then came up with a solution.

Many times, I could change, modify or withdraw my original decisions. These involved matters to do with students' affairs, disciplinary actions and staff problems. I thought that, as parents, we considered all aspects of human life and became more humane and sympathetic before arriving at a solution. It is difficult to lead and manage human beings. Each has his/her demands, hate and liking.

I am proud of the fact that during my thirteen years at JKUAT as a Vice-Chancellor, I did not expel any student. Not that they were all of the best behaviour. At times we had disturbing disciplinary cases. But I personally intervened in some of them just to advise. I counselled many students whenever they were involved in any mischief and made them sign agreements with me for good conduct and behaviour.

No student was expelled as long as they apologized in front of disciplinary committees and agreed to change for the better. I did not believe in student expulsions. My legacy rests in this humane approach to the youth. I, however, meted out harsh corrective punishments occasionally.

I learnt so many things as a leader. I went through adversity and rose up. I learnt that if I was so overly conscious of what people said and thought of me or how I performed my duties, I would never make progress. I also realized that if everyone agreed with me all the time, then I was not making progress or good decisions.

I had to elevate my thinking above an average manager and continually increase my exposure and visibility beyond the corridors of my working environment. I accomplished this by increasing my appetite for acquiring current information through any means necessary. It would have been through meetings, internet search, seminars, symposia, conferences or even staff bonding. Knowledge is power. This was the only key to confidence regardless of any circumstances. It was important that in spite of any adversity, I remained confident and planned strategically for the next move.

 Leadership is a responsibility; and the buck stops at the chief executive's desk. In the end, it is important to note that knowledge graced with humility, education, and integrity is the only path that leads to intergeneration impact and the greatness that people vie for.

When I resumed my teaching role at the University of Nairobi in 2003, Kenya had seven public universities and five chartered private universities. There were also several university colleges and campuses. This was a great step towards providing education to all those who qualified and met the criteria for university admission. After a short period in 2013, the total number of public and private

universities shot up to 66. These included 31 public universities, two university colleges and 33 privately-managed universities. This was massive growth of institutions in short time.

I was amazed at the speed of awarding the charters. What we have currently is the mushrooming of all types of university institutions purporting to provide quality education to unsuspecting students. This was the onset of the chaos. When reputable universities convert tertiary colleges into University campuses, the country negates chances for the middle-level colleges to train the much- needed middle-level cadre of technical staff. Areas like agriculture, engineering, architecture, health services, food processing, just to name a few, suffer in terms of technical personnel. This is the much-needed cadre of people to see Kenya jump- start its industrial agenda. I do not say graduates cannot propel the country's economy, but they need a large number of technical staff.

The idea of elevating middle-level colleges to universities is questionable. This was not the opportune time; it was a rushed decision. It would have been done systematically and selectively using a search team of experts. Perhaps a search committee like the one we used in 1994 should have been constituted to propose which colleges would be elevated to university status.

Such a select committee would have used the already existing technical inspection procedures and instruments to advise the relevant authority about the appropriate colleges that would be converted to full university status. In any case, the conversion of numerous middle-level colleges into universities was in itself retrospective. This was a sure way of slowing down industrialization and denying a certain cadre of school leavers a chance to progress. Universities could not absorb all the school leavers. The middle-level colleges were an excellent absorption entry for this particular group.

I used to chair a commission sub-committee on technical evaluation of private universities for accreditation. We developed a checklist which assisted us to qualify the universities. Among the questions we considered was the learning environment of the campus. To say the least, the current premises which house university campuses do not meet minimum requirements. Most of the students who are self-sponsored and virtually pay all the expenses find it tough to get good accommodation, water and power. Some lecture halls lack basic facilities and are poorly lit.

Currently, many universities have a section called Quality Assurance and Standards Departments. The sections are supposed to ensure that all the laid-down procedures for maintaining the standards as per the syllabi are adhered to. They also have a duty to prescribe rules and regulations to be followed for perfect course delivery. This is easily put on paper and committees are set up.

The actual practices leave a lot to be desired. Some universities may have no capacity to evaluate their peers in terms of content, materiel delivery, examination set-ups and even prescribed contact hours. The student numbers can be overwhelming

and render such committees redundant. The government, on the other hand, has left the running and student enrolments to individual universities. It is basically detached from the vices that hurt the quality.

Other than the provision of funds to cater for the salaries and statutory deductions, the Ministry of Education has left the commission for university education to run the show solely. It is also not in a position to implement the numerous tasks it is charged with. The staffing is inadequate and incapable of judging the quality of education. Other than the government creating and changing tertiary campuses into university colleges, it has little, if any, role to play in ensuring that university statutes are followed.

Competition by individual universities for students as a source of income has led to the deteriorating quality of education. At the same time, this kind of education and poor student-lecturer interaction has led to incompetent graduates. The high number of students admitted into universities is disturbing. Critics claim that this has become a channel for robots, photocopiers, plagiarists and obscurantists. The students themselves are more concerned with getting grades using the shortest means possible. This has caused rampant plagiarism and hiring of "experts" to write papers and dissertations for others.

What is happening these days is totally the opposite of intellectualism and critical thinking and analyses of crucial national issues. A few people are engaged in nation-building through critical evaluations of the needs of the country. This is where the role of universities comes in.

The burdened lecturers who teach large numbers of students have no time to do scholarly work or research which are prerequisites. Lecturers keep moving from one campus to another and this is even more time-consuming and destructive to quality education. They do not get time to plan, mark, revise and even administer examinations. The introduction of certificate and diploma courses is a wrong move. I have never ever understood why senates stooped so low and approved such courses! A university has specific missions, to train degree students and conduct high-quality research for national development.

Surely, can a certificate or diploma youth come up with an advanced innovation while carrying out the several units they take? I am not saying they cannot; but they themselves have no time either. The middle-level colleges are best placed to absorb such students.

The Role of Boards and Councils

Generally speaking, Kenya has set up management system which uses committees to oversee functions of corporations, institutions and private companies. Boards and Councils are supposed to provide leadership and general guidance to their institutions. Government institutions are primarily parastatals, universities, colleges and schools. These are run by a group of people nominated by relevant authorities.

In many set-ups, members of the board are non-executive. Having been a chairman of KARI Board of Management, a Council member of National Council for Science and Technology (NACOSTI), a Commissioner for University Education and a board member of Kenya Marine and Fisheries Institute, I have had adequate experience to draw on in defining the parameters of good corporate governance. I have also been groomed by the JKUAT Council and finally NEMA Board of Management.

In all these engagements, no board chairman or member took the responsibilities of running the institutions in question. A board chairman who is executive in appointment is expressly indicated so. None of the one I cited above had executive powers. As a chairman also, I had non-executive powers. I chaired boards and I also had other persons chair mine. I worked in both worlds. I am using the board to include or infer the roles of Councils. I was also a chief executive.

Briefly, the role and responsibilities of a board/Council include:
- Effective leadership;
- Integrity in judgement;
- Monitoring and evaluation of progress;
- Approve strategic plans;
- Approval of budgets and accountable for financial statements;
- Compliance with relevant laws and codes for best practices;
- Employs staff and monitors their exits;
- Stewards of all property and resources;
- Accountability and disclosure;
- Approval of performance contract plans;
- Assist and work with the chief executive;
- Advise, protect and promote the chief executive and the institution;
- Assign the CEO duties as stipulated by law.

The board or Council meets quarterly as specified by law. The chief executive runs the institution on behalf of the board. He is the person in charge of the day-to-day running of the organization. The boards or Councils should not interfere with his roles unless requested to do so by a relevant authority of government. The boards or Councils transact business through their established sub-committees. These are also specified by law. In fact the board shields the chief executive whenever controversies arise.

The chairman is the spokesman of the Council or board. But he/she should not micromanage the organisation. Ideally, the chairman should possess the following attributes; courage, humility, integrity, diligence, conviction, optimism and discipline.

Suffice it to say that on all the boards and Councils I have chaired, I have kept the laws and regulations to the letter. I have had no interference with the CEO's work. I considered my relationship with members and the CEOs as perfect.

The other boards where I have had a chairman, the same mutual relationship prevailed. I had a perfect working relationship with the chairs and Council members, except one, NEMA – where confusion reigned sometimes. The NEMA chairman perhaps mistook the office as executive. He demanded an elaborate office with a fulltime secretary, a car and all other benefits as if for a fulltime officer.

Normally, there is an office for the chair but not as fulltime staff. The basic needs for a chair were provided, such as being picked and dropped for meetings or occasionally visiting the CEO for consultations.

This could be the beginning of problems which may culminate in ugly confrontations between the board members, the CEO and the parent ministry. The demands were not in line with the advisory roles as stipulated in the corporate governance Act. I had neither behaved so personally, nor had my previous chairmen.

Despite my making every effort to brief the board, particularly the chair, on their roles in NEMA, I still had a rough time convincing them that theirs was a bigger responsibility than clamour for the scarce office spaces and caused fear to the staff as they worked and hang around the offices. A case in point was to compare a university chairperson with those in parastatals. The current Education Act of 2010 is very clear on the type of chairperson that can head the Council. There is the chancellor who is ceremonial in nature and awards degrees and diplomas. He or she also inspects the university and may be called upon to advice.

The chairperson of Council therefore has more roles in the running of the university. The day-to-day functions are left to the chief executive. However, the Act is deficient in its stipulations of the qualifications of the Chancellor.

How can somebody who has not earned a PhD, for example, be empowered to award degrees and diplomas? What capacity does such a person have to advise on the quality of education? What practical research experience does such a person have to advise on the kind of research that future prospective candidates should undertake? Is that a role model to the upcoming young generation? Who are their academic peers?

I ask these questions because of the ever-deteriorating academic standards in many African universities. Chairpersons of Councils have some responsibilities to undertake. These responsibilities are not full-time in nature and do not deserve full-time personnel engagement – as the case was in NEMA.

Despite my concerted efforts to have a cohesive staff who worked as a team, the differences which were noticed between the board and management caused some visible division amongst staff. I had built up an excellent team to push the

environmental agenda forward. Just like the university, many staff in NEMA saw the growing future prospects in terms of job professionalism and upward mobility. We bonded well with predetermined notions of creating environmental awareness for Kenyans.

My staff's salaries were approved by the board, having gone through the normal board committee. They were paid higher than their counterparts in the parent ministry and this was viewed as unfair. For example, provincial, now county, environmental officers were paid better than their counterparts. One difference was that I demanded a second degree for one to be employed in the province, which their counterparts did not have.

Unfortunately, appointments in Kenya's plum positions at the time were not based on merit but sycophancy, tribalism, nepotism and favours. NEMA had clearly laid down appointment criteria for various posts. The board was supportive on these demands. Board members comprised eminent scholars: three professors and the rest were PhD graduates. The authority was proudly nicknamed a JKUAT extended campus.

This did not bother me as I had scored well in running the university for thirteen years. In fact the respect and promotion of NEMA's mandate was directly linked to my success in managing JKUAT. I had already left a legacy in JKUAT.My immediate permanent secretary was not a graduate and hence differences would occur in numerous undertakings. We worked very well despite the slow pace and unbelievable bureaucracy in government operations/mechanisms. Approval of documents, for example, would take ages to be effected. This was the biggest hindrance in implementation of programmes. I honestly did not understand why a small ministry like environment, as it was considered, would take weeks if not months to respond!!

My working desk in NEMA was always clear. I never left pending work. Just as in JKUAT, I never postponed any paper work for the following day. I did not carry any office work home either. It was not in my nature to delay decisions. I took action no matter how unpopular it would be. I made a few mistakes and corrected them along the line, but I surely made decisions. If an action needed consultations, I just did that and had my minutes written clearly in case of litigation.

Delays in decision-making may result in unrest, strikes, mistrust, despondency, corruption, all of which are retrogressive. Institutions in developed nations have a system of expediting their decision-making on time. This avoids loss of opportunity costs in various aspects of the economy.

Clearing of my desk was one habit that I developed early even when I was at the bank. I needed my freedom after work. I therefore disengaged my office matters from those of my family. That was what I was known for; and I was unhappy with colleagues who delayed to take action. Such tendency hampers processes and

kills the morale of workers. A few exceptions exist, of course. Reading a student's thesis or reviewing academic papers may demand to be done at home. I would be flexible in this regard.

Notwithstanding all these shortcomings, our mandate to create environmental awareness was felt. The basic questions I always asked myself was: Why do some changes fail while others succeed? How do we manage change among a new group of staff who do not regard new ideas as useful? How can one lead change successfully both professionally and in personal concerns?

Resistance to change borrows a lot from past successes or failures. My past record was good and NEMA employees were positive in realizing new ideas. I had engaged my employees in the change process. They owned and participated in environmental activities. I recall staff being very enthusiastic during major environmental days when we mounted road shows all over the country to educate the public. The road shows were embraced by the workers and NEMA largely succeeded in the promotion of the environmental agenda for and in Kenya.

I always stressed eight characteristics of a good worker. I said they included:

> courage, humility, integrity, loyalty, diligence, conviction, optimism and discipline. If my staff possessed these characteristics, I knew that we would meet our challenges and obligations without fail. I used to emphasize to them the importance of a good public image and name. These were the same messages I used to deliver while I was the Vice-Chancellor of JKUAT.