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## RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A THEORETICAL FOCUS ON INCLUSIVITY AND EMPOWERMENT FOR HEALTHIER PARTNERSHIPS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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### ABSTRACT

*Leadership is a key ingredient in corporate effectiveness and involves social relational processes that provide a basis for connectedness between leaders and their subordinates and between the organization and its various partnering organizations. This paper discussed relational leadership, emphasizing two dimensions: inclusivity and empowerment, as the basis for improved or healthier partnerships in the Tourism Industry. The paper design is theoretical and the discussion is anchored within the theoretical framework of the social capital theory. The social capital theory prescribes actions geared toward strengthening networks and relationships through the development of trust and the engagement of partners. This view is reiterated by the relational leadership approach – specifically in line with its inclusivity and empowerment dimensions. Relational leadership, based on the review, supports a blending of interests – advancing group-based decisions necessary for improved levels of collaboration and trust. Thus, it was concluded that relational leadership promotes trust and group-based decision making, considered as important in developing understanding, reliability and confidence by various partners in the organization. These impact positively on the health of the organization's partnerships and spur its learning and growth outcome. This way of theorizing leadership for the Tourism Industry also has practical implications in helping sensitize leaders to the importance of their relationships and*



*to features of conversations and everyday mundane occurrences that can reveal new possibilities for morally-responsible leadership.*

**Keywords:** Relational leadership, inclusivity, empowerment, partnerships, Tourism

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is a significant social phenomenon, that involves a temporary break with normal routine activities to engage with experiences that contrast with everyday life. Tourism is concerned with pleasure, holidays, travel, accommodation, and going or arriving somewhere other than one's permanent place of abode or work, and consuming goods and services at the destinations. The Tourism industry, which is described as the largest industry in the world and also as the "industry of industries" (Ekeke and Ndu, 2021), comprises of organisations that cover anything that caters to visitors, from abroad, or even locally. They are a structured social system consisting of groups of individuals working together to meet some expected objectives. These organizations as systems are highly dynamic. Their actions and processes are such that mimic and, in that nature, strategically aligns with the overarching values and features of their environment, just as the micro-organism 'amoeba' does to its external environment. Hence their survival and performance, stem from their learning capacity and effectively applying knowledge. Axelsson and Axelsson (2006) identified learning as a social process – one which borders on observing, interacting and partnering with significant others within the industry. This aligns with Tschannen-Moran (2001) observation that organizational partnerships and collaborations provide the basis and yardsticks for understanding the pervading qualities and attributes that are unique to their context, and also for equipping the organization with the appropriate tools or skills, necessary for advancing their interests. Based on the ongoing, one could therefore assert that partnerships are important and support learning, development and the effectiveness of the organization – thus necessitating improved organizational outcomes.

Healthy partnerships are such that are based on trust, collaboration and most importantly, information and knowledge sharing (Alves et al, 2007). Such partnerships are concerned with the exchange of ideas and the provision of support when required. The emphasis on



the health of the partnership, of course, suggests that there are partnerships that are superficial and void of the required levels of trust and learning opportunities – rather marked by actions that one could consider exploitative and manipulative (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006). Such pose a risk to the success of alliances and offer no real support for the organization especially during trying times. These forms are detrimental to the well-being and success of the organization. Related studies identify healthy partnerships as sprouts of trusting relationships. According to Thompson and Perry (2006), much of what is captured within the content of partnerships mirror the perceptions partners have of each other and the extent to which they trust each other.

Related studies (Dyer & Chu, 2011; Greer, 2017; Obiora & Ifegbo, 2019; Thompson & Perry, 2008) bothering on organizational networks, partnerships and stakeholder collaborations appear with the evidence of partnerships and collaborative actions between organizations and their various stakeholders (host communities, the government, employees, customers, vendors). However, as stated earlier, partnerships can be superficial and, in that form, offer no substantial value. This assertion draws from the social capital theory (Burt, 2000), which identified trust as a vital component in the validation of organizations by other constituents of their networks – thus reinforcing their resolve to share knowledge and technology with the organization. In their research, Kaats and Opheji (2014) identified the culture as a potential conditioning factor that either advances or constrains the organization's partnership success outcomes. Gajda (2004) in another study argued that partnerships are strategic and as such are a consequence of the leadership of the organization.

Eacott (2018) and Hoang, Wilson-Evered, Lockstone-Binney and Trong, (2021) identified leadership as central to the Tourism and hospitality's organisational actions and engagement of its stakeholders. Furthermore, Ofobruku (2013), identifies that 'the pivot of any group, organization or business is leadership and Leadership is the critical element which harnesses other resources for organizational and business success or effectiveness' (p.54) within Industry. From a relational perspective, leadership can be described as the chain which connects and channels the organization's various units, skills, competencies and technologies toward a clear vision and goal. While there is a dearth of studies addressing healthy partnerships, there is also a paucity of literature that has examined relationship-based leadership and its implications for partnership outcomes. This paper contributes to



knowledge in leadership theory and practice in the Tourism Industry as it discusses the concepts of relational leadership and healthy partnerships. The goal of this paper and its premise for departure is to offer clarity on the related concepts and in the same vein, discuss two key components of relational leadership – and how they advance or contribute toward healthy partnerships. This relationship is anchored within the theoretical premise of the social capital theory.

### **Social Capital Theory**

Social capital describes the advantages and benefits that accrue from the organization's network and partnerships (Coleman 1988 cited in Burt, 2000). Its related theory has advanced over years and various authors have offered alternate versions of what it entails (Bowles & Gintis, 2002), however, this paper draws from the underpinning ideas of Arrow (2000) and Burt (2000), who described the social capital as the opportunities and edge offered the organization based on the validation it receives within its network. According to Burt (2000) as social factors and mechanisms, organizations rely on their environment and the support of other systems within such an environment for effectiveness. Burt (2000) further noted that where there is no harmony or agreement between the organization and its environment, there is bound to be conflict, the disruption of activities and processes, decline in operations, and in most cases failure. To be effective, organizations must not only partner and collaborate with significant others within their contexts, but must also utilize such partnerships and collaborations as opportunities for learning and development within their environment. The social capital theory prescribes relationship building and focuses as a basis for enriching partnership experiences and getting the best out of such.

Relationships provide a basis for trust and shared confidence. Relationships also create a shared cognitive or mental space where social actors or partners within the same relationship share in the interpretations of social realities (Gardner, 2017; Pearce et al, 2008). In other words, relationships create a framework that facilitates agreement in terms of interpretations and decision-making. In bridging possible differences between parties and increasing the trustworthiness of the organization, Deloitte(2018) argued that actions concerned with relationship-based coordination and leadership necessitate stronger levels of bonding between the leader and followers and between the organization and its stakeholders. Shamir (2011) stated that not only are members allowed to share and



contribute to the decision-making process of the organization, they are also empowered to apply their creative ideas in line with actions related to their responsibilities. Branson (2009) opined that the relational leader emerges from the group and is as such, highly integrated and inclusive. The extent of its inclusivity allows for the decentralization of powers and authority and as such a more versatile and enriched approach toward coordination.

## **2. RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

The concept of relational leadership is premised on the ideology of shared leadership responsibilities, relationship-based coordination and group-based decision processes (Branson, 2014). Hence, relational leadership describes the various actions that recognize and value the input of significant others in the process of leadership, empowering them to share in the leadership actions and to make decisions particular to their responsibilities or roles (Robison, 2018). This way, one could assert that relational leadership is a collaborative approach toward leadership that trusts and that way delegates functions, responsibilities and decisions to significant others. Relational leaders are defined by their capacity to effectively engage others and build a robust structure of closely knitted relationships and partnerships outside the organization (Amagoh, 2009; Haslam et al, 2011). Relational leaders are people-oriented and unlike transformational leadership which is focused on the development and motivation of its workers, relational leaders approach leadership based on people integration and shared decision-making processes. While a variety of qualities such as purposive, ethical, empowering and inclusive have been utilized to conceptualize and describe relational leadership, this paper streamlines its focus based on context and relevance to just two components: Inclusivity and empowerment dimensions (Crevani et al, 2010).

**3.1 Leadership inclusivity:** Inclusivity refers to the leader's openness toward involving significant others in the decision-making and strategic choices of the organization. Korngold (2006) noted that inclusivity in the case of relational leadership is not just structured to advance a voice for the employees but to also engage their ideas, opinions and creativity in the actions and leadership of the organization. Inclusivity according to Hoyt et al (2003) also advances opportunities for collaboration between the leadership of the organization and the stakeholders. This is as Kane et al (2002) noted that the inclusion and engagement of other key parties in the decision process of the organization increase their recognition and

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enhance their sense of belongingness to the organization. Stonecipher (2012) agreed with this position, stating that inclusivity bridges the various levels in the organization and between the organization and its stakeholders, creating a shared position that enables cohesion and a more substantial merging or blending of values by the various parties or groups involved with the organization. Moreso, inclusivity leverages the pooling of ideas in advancing quality organizational outcomes.

**3.2 Empowerment:** The action of empowerment suggests a good level of trust and confidence in the ability and sensibility of others (Lockett & Boyd, 2012). Through empowerment, leaders express their confidence in others and by that enhance the other parties' sense or feeling of relevance to the organization. Paglis(2010) described empowerment as the sharing of powers or responsibilities such that other members of the organization are allowed moderate levels of control over related processes or functions concerned with their roles or responsibilities. Empowerment, according to Villanueva and Sanchez (2007) also increases room for workers to work with low supervision and hence more space and control over their work, thus enabling them to be more innovative or resourceful about their work. One of the major advantages of empowering workers and other stakeholders is that it facilitates improved outcomes of flexibility and agility for the organization – enriching its options and operational variety through the varied methods, techniques and alternative approaches advanced by its constituents. Studies (Shamir, 2011; Watson et al 2001; Amagoh, 2009) that support empowerment however emphasize the imperatives of operational frameworks or parameters as guides in streamlining actions and avoiding power abuse.

#### **4. HEALTHY PARTNERSHIPS**

The concept of healthy partnerships implies a deeper and more interrelated form of relationship between members of the organization and also between the organization and its stakeholders (Amah & Ahiauzu, 2013; Obiora, 2021; Stumer et al, 2014). Partnerships can be internal to the organization and also external amongst which are (but not limited to) various stakeholder organizations in different sectors, including; tourists, tourism suppliers/tour services, host governments, host communities, and surrounding environments that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors and also, significant others that offer services that link the various components of tourism product. Nonetheless,



healthy partnerships describe the extent to which the cooperation between two or more entities can be described as beneficial to the parties involved, non-exploitative, and enabling learning and growth opportunities (Gajda, 2004). Healthy partnerships as such are premised on trust and the extent to which partners perceive each other as reliable, consistent in their behaviour and advancing the interest of all parties – not just their own. Camarinha-Mastyos and Afsarmanesh(2012) stated that the competition and growing rivalry between organizations in most industries has created flaws in various markets – such that there has been a steady decline in collaborative actions by organizations and an increasing preference for cut-throat competition. This affects the general growth of the industry and also has a crippling effect on collaborative progress. Damanpour and Aravind(2012) further noted that such high-end competition demonstrates a focus on edging out other organizations considered as competitors from the market and that way suggests an emphasis on advancing the interest of the organization rather than the needs of the market.

Healthy partnerships are not only imperative for the market or industry, it also enriches the organization's relationship with its various stakeholders and the constituents of its environment. Greer (2017) observed that effective organizations are such that can consistently navigate through a myriad of stakeholders demands and expectations –bridging values and interests and also aligning the organization'sbehaviour with the emphasized social, economic and environmental parameters of its hosts. In this vein, the partnership strengthens the mutuality between organizations, synchronizing interests and ensuring that organizations can function and operate more effectively. Greer (2017) stated that despite the noted benefits linked to healthy partnerships, most organizations are lax when it comes to partnership. Their actions understandably, trace to concerns of sustaining their competitive edge over others and not divulging information or knowledge that may at the end equip partners who are also potential competitors (Dyer & Chu, 2011). This desire to remain dominant and relevant has led to organizations engaging in the exploitation of partnering firms, secrecy in terms of technology, and other related behaviour which can be considered selfish. Such features are manifested in most partnership forms between multinationals from developed contexts and their partnering indigenous organizations within most underdeveloped African economies (Thompson et al, 2007). Hence, as Thompson et al (2008) observed, the competitive orientation offers a superficial approach



to innovation and service, premised solely on the need for relevance and dominance of the market, and one which in the actual sense weakens the collaborative spirit and actual basis for growth.

## **5. RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND HEALTHY PARTNERSHIPS**

Leadership is considered the propeller of the organization. As a social action, one of its fundamental responsibilities is to coordinate and harmonize the organization's key resources and constituents (Eacott, 2018). Relational leadership plays an important role in stabilizing the workplace and also in ensuring that members agree and are in unity when it comes to the goals of the organization. Robison (2018) described relational leadership as a necessary approach in addressing the high prone conflict situations in most industries; noting that leadership as a social function should focus not on coercive measures alone but also on advancing the well-being of its subordinates and creating a more integrated and collaborative structure which enriches members experiences and enhances agreeability between the organization and its various stakeholders. Corroborating this, Cunliff&Eriksen (2011) describes relational leadership as 'offering new kinds of action guiding anticipatory understandings that may sensitize leaders to the impact of their interactions and enable them to become more reflexive and ethical practitioners' (p.1428).

This follows the position of Haslam et al (2011) that one of the qualities readily identifiable with relationship-based coordination and leadership is trust. Kane et al (2002) argued that through the collaboration and group decision-making actions occasioned by relational leaders, members tend to experience an increased sense of affiliation and belongingness with the organization and are readily more receptive to shared positions and choices agreed on.

Literature (Watson et al, 2001; Stonecipher, 2012; Shamir, 2011) appears to support the view on relationships as a basis for trust, cooperation and effectiveness when it comes to leadership. Amagoh(2009) stated that workers who have good relations with their supervisors or superiors in the organization, tend to be more committed to the success of the leadership. Amagoh(2009) also noted that through inclusive actions and the empowering of significant others, the organization can strengthen the bond between the workforce and the organization's leadership. This follows Gardner's(2017) observation that related actions of decision autonomy, involvement and empowerment can be strategically



applied to the benefit of the organization. This is because such actions advance intrinsic satisfaction, meaning and a sense of relevance to the organization. Equally, when partnering organizations are duly informed and engaged, informed and allowed to share in key responsibilities, there is a higher tendency for improved trust and outcomes of knowledge sharing. From this position, one could therefore argue that the features of relational leadership are consistent with the conditions necessary for improved outcomes of healthier internal and external organizational partnerships.

We posit further that relational leadership is not a one-off exercise, but part of the realm of daily occurrences of the leader that is fully embedded within an optimistic view of positive goal-oriented, non-coercive social interaction with internal and external stakeholders, towards the attainment of organisational objectives.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Relationships are necessary for advancing trusting and healthy partnerships. To be considered as healthy, a business or organizational partnership must advance support and learning opportunities for the organization; ensuring it can grow and to be effective based on its interactions and exchanges within its network. Relationship-based coordination and leadership provide a basis and core in which the units of the organization are duly synchronized and interests harmonized. In this vein, relational leadership promotes trust and group-based decision making, considered as important in developing understanding, reliability and confidence by various partners in the organization. These impact positively on the health of the organization's partnerships and spur its learning, effectiveness and growth outcome.

The Tourism Industry in Nigeria has witnessed such a great transformation that professionalism is on the increase. From this study, it is therefore recommended that leaders/managers in Tourism organisations adopt a relational leadership approach that would enable better empowerment and inclusivity of employees and to enhance better collaboration between stakeholders.



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