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HEIGHTENING LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF UGANDA: 'CHALLENGE THE PROCESS' FOR ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT¹

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ABSTRACT

Leadership effectiveness is an enviable characteristic in public as well as in private organisations. This article presents a discussion of the leadership practice known as 'Challenge the Process'; within the context of Bushenyi district local government administration in Uganda. The discussion reveals that the leadership practice of 'challenge the process' influences the organisational climate and can be influential in generating change within an organisation. The study also demonstrates that Bushenyi district employees associate the behaviour patterns of their leaders and supervisors with the organisation. Based on data collected, the argument is that the leadership practice of 'challenge the process' positively influences employees' perceived organisational support in Bushenyi local government of Uganda. The conclusions are in agreement with Kouzes and Posner (2002) that leaders who 'challenge the process' can achieve extraordinary results and improve employees' perceived organisational support.

The article recommends that in the current environment of local government administration in Uganda be characterised by a democratic political dispensation and private-public sector initiatives; leaders should consider not merely being mindful of the rules and standing instructions in public administration; must be innovative, willing to take risks, and challenge assumptions about the way things have always

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been done in order to increase employees' perceived organisational support. As stressed by Kouzes and Posner (2002), leaders in local governments can promote the resourcefulness of employees at work through the practice of 'challenge the process'.

Keywords: Bushenyi district; challenge the process; leadership; local government administration; Uganda

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, Uganda adopted a decentralisation policy that sought to establish a governance system to promote effective service delivery. Subsequently, the constitutional and legal reforms have established districts and sub-counties as pillars of local government administration. Although decentralisation has been pursued over twenty-one years, there is widespread consensus that the performance of local governments is less than desirable. In particular, the district revenue base has remained dismal compared to the demands for public services. Rendering of public services is heavily dependent on central government disbursements, mainly through conditional grants. Also, the quality of service provision is less than desirable. For example, key services such as health care, water, sanitation, education, and access to agricultural advisory services remain dismal. Unbelievably, the citizens who are the intended beneficiaries of the decentralisation system are not visibly demanding leadership effectiveness and better performance from local governments.

Previous research studies suggest that selecting a leader with appropriate leadership skills is significant for a firm's success (Dubrin 2004). In responding to this need, researchers have developed a variety of leadership theories. Past research has shown that leadership has an important influence on organisational commitment and subordinates' job satisfaction (Chen 2004). Specific categories of leadership theory, such as the impact of perceived leadership practices, have been developed and studied by Kouzes and Posner (2004). Other studies have found that specific perceived leadership practices could increase work-related outcomes, including employee commitment (Zahra 1984; Steers 1997).

Kouzes and Posner (2002) observe that leadership effectiveness is not only about the individual leader but also a collective relationship that subsists between the leader and followers and is based on the follower's perceptions. To articulate the development of leadership effectiveness in organisations, Bennis (1988) observes that leadership talent is acquired through leading in and through hardship. Focusing on the perspective of followers, Blanchard (2004) considers job satisfaction as the true indicator and measure of leadership effectiveness in organisations. The employee's ability to get-along with the 'boss' is a true measure of leadership effectiveness and is the number one factor that influences happiness in the job (Blanchard 2004). The

author stresses that leadership effectiveness in an organisation reflects how leaders and subordinate employees perceive the importance of their own experiences with each other for organisational well-being, as well as the individual well-being.

Leadership effectiveness is about balancing the employees' shared work experiences with the realisation of individual employees' expectations at the workplace (Blanchard 2004). While over the years the Ugandan government has sought to improve the functioning of local governments through regular monitoring, accountability, transparency and inspection processes among other aspects, these processes have not adequately resulted in effective leadership from the mandated executive (civil servants) and legislative (politicians) officers in local governments. Therefore, this article is a product of an ongoing examination of the leadership practices exercised in Bushenyi, Isingiro and Mbarara local governments in southwestern Uganda. Primarily, it discusses the influence of the leadership practice dubbed 'challenge the process' in stimulating employees' organisational support for leadership effectiveness within the context of Bushenyi district in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Bushenyi district is one of the one hundred and fifteen (115) districts of Uganda and has been ranked a model district since 1998. To determine the influence of the leadership practice 'challenge the process' on perceived organisational support in Uganda, the study relied on 127 responses of civil servants employed in Bushenyi district. In the survey, respondents presented their perceived leaders' behavioural traits. The category 'leaders' that was evaluated comprised the district executive committee comprising the district Chairperson (LCV), Chief Administrative Officer (administrative head and accounting officer), and eight sector heads (production, finance, human resources, planning, works, health, community development, water and sanitation).

Interviews considered how frequently leaders engaged in the practice of 'challenge the process' and the dependent variable of perceived organisational support. All the 127 civil servants completed the survey questionnaire. These respondents were the available convenience sample population for the study.

The Leadership Practices Inventory-Other (LPI-O) questionnaire was used to assess one of the five leadership practices, that is, 'challenge the process', inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way and encouraging the heart (Kouzes and Posner 2002; Jeff 2009). However, the study results and discussion are restricted to the first component; 'challenge the process'. According to Kouzes and Posner (2004), 'Challenge the process' means the ability of the leader to encourage employees to query past ways of doing things. Torpman (2004) likens 'challenge the process' to the practice of intellectual stimulation of transformational leadership style by stating that

Subordinates are encouraged to experiment, challenge existent constraints, by taking risks concerning the organization and subordinates' positions in them. Mistakes are opportunities for learning instead of causes for blame. Continuous learning is stimulated as well as old values and beliefs are reassessed. The learning aspect is related to the experimenting attitude that is expected from subordinates. (Torpman 2004: 895)

Similarly, Bass and Avolio (2003) have described intellectual stimulation as a leadership practice of finding and implementing new and better ways of doing things in order to constantly improve and grow. Leadership entails challenging others in the organisation in order to give them the opportunity to be great individuals and organisations (Kouzes and Posner 2000). Leaders should also experiment, take risks, and challenge the status quo (Torpman 2004). 'Challenge the process' was measured by the Leadership Practices Inventory-Other (LPI-O) developed by Kouzes and Posner (2002).

The LPI-O questionnaire was used to assess the subordinates' perceptions of their leaders' 'challenge the process' practice. In earlier studies by Posner and Kouzes (1993), the overall internal reliability scores of LPI-O questionnaire ranged from 0.81 to 0.91. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha score for the 'challenge the process' component was 0.93. Thus, the LPI-O survey questionnaire results are highly reliable and in agreement with Posner and Kouzes's (1993) recommendations. The responses were based on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 10 (very frequently).

As depicted in Table 1, the 'challenge the process' practices were scored based on responses to behavioural statements measured on a 10-point Likert-scale. Then, the mean and standard deviation for each of the six questions were computed as depicted in Table 2. A higher value represents more frequent use of the leadership behavior: (10) Very Frequently, (9) Frequently, (8) Usually, (7) Fairly Often, (6) Sometimes, (5) Occasionally, (4) Once in a While, (3) Seldom, (2) Rarely, and (1) Almost Never. Below in table 1, are the six survey questions administered to 127 employees of Bushenyi district local government.

In order to test the prevalence of 'challenge the process' leadership practice, descriptive statistics were used to assess the independent variable. The descriptive statistics for 'challenge the process' leadership practice are shown in Table 2 below, following the survey questions in Table 1.

Table 1: ‘Challenge the process’ leadership practice survey questions

Leadership Practice	Question in the LIP-O questionnaire
Challenging the process	3. Seeks out challenging opportunities that test his/her own skills and abilities 8. Challenges people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work. 13. Searches outside the formal boundaries of his/her organization for innovative ways to improve what we do. 18. Asks what can we learn when things do not go as expected? 23. Makes certain that we set achievable goals, make concrete plans and establish measurable milestones for the projects and programs we work on. 28. Experiments and takes risks, even when there is a chance of failure.

Source: Posner and Kouzes 1993.

Employees portray organisations as they develop perceived organisational support (POS) (Eisenberger et al. 1986). ‘Perceived Organizational Support is an experience-based attribution concerning the benevolent or malevolent intent of the organization’s policies, norms, procedures, and action as they affect employees’ by the leader (Eisenberger et al. 2001:42). Since employees base appreciation about their treatment by the organisation on the leader’s practices and they perceive whether or not it favours or disfavors them appreciation processes of employees were used to deduce organisational support. These attribution processes are based on experience concerning the caring or non-caring intentions of policies, norms, or actions of an organisation that affect employees (Eisenberger et al. 2001). When perceived organisational support is high, the employees are expected to feel duty-bound to be committed and engage in behaviour that furthers the goals of the organisation (Wayne et al. 1997; Eisenberger et al. 1990; Randall et al. 1999; Rhodes et al. 2001; Aselage and Eisenberger 2003).

The dependent variable of perceived organisation support was measured using the Survey questionnaire of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The POS survey questionnaire consists of 36 questions in which the employees indicated the extent they agreed with each item. Based on a Likert scale, half of the questions in the questionnaire were positively and half negatively worded to control response bias. The negatively worked questions (3, 6, 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 22, 23, 26, 28, 31, 32, and 34) were reverse coded.

Finally, the study attempted to examine whether enhancing ‘challenge the process’ practices can lead towards greater perceived organisational support in Bushenyi district local government. Discussion of the results does not address other variables such as employee commitment, satisfaction, or turnover since these were considered by the researcher to be beyond the scope of inquiry. The specific research hypothesis examined was:

H₁: Enhanced ‘challenge the process’ leadership practices leads to greater subordinate perceived organisational support in Uganda’s local governments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Cronbach alpha reliability measure was performed to show the internal reliability of the LPI-O survey instruments. The LPI-O survey instrument consisted of 30 descriptive statements (6 statements for each practice) regarding five different leadership practices. For this article, only the six statements (table 1) related to “challenge the process”, were examined. The responses were based on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 10 (very frequently). The test-retest reliability for the “challenge the process” leadership practice completed using 127 respondents of Bushenyi district, returned a Cronbach alpha score of 0.93. Below are the descriptive statistics describing the “challenge the process” leaders’ behaviour of Bushenyi district in Uganda.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for ‘challenge the process’ practice

Statement	Mean	SD
3. Seeks out challenging opportunities that test his/her own skills and abilities	6.88	2.04
8. Challenges people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work.	6.8	1.99
13. Searches outside the formal boundaries of his/her organisation for innovative ways to improve what we do.	6.57	2.47
18. Asks what can we learn when things don’t go as expected?	6.35	2.4
23. Makes certain that we set achievable goals, make concrete plans and establish measurable milestones for the projects and programs we work on.	5.98	2.71
28. Experiments and takes risks, even when there is a chance of failure.	6.45	2.35
Overall Mean Score	6.51	2.33

Source: primary field data, 2013

The results show that the overall mean score for ‘Challenge the Process’ perceived leaders’ behaviour is 6.51 and with a standard deviation score of 2.33 respectively.

Findings also revealed a higher score for seeking challenging opportunities ($M = 6.88$, $SD = 2.04$); and challenging people to improve ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 1.99$). The study results reveal that Bushenyi district employees perceive their leaders to challenge them and seek-out challenging opportunities to test their own abilities and skills fairly often.

These were closely followed by seek outside the organisation for innovative ways of improvement ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 2.47$) and risk failure ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 2.35$). The results indicate that employees perceive their leaders to allow their subordinates to search outside the organisation for innovative ways to improve and take risks sometimes. Lower (yet above average = 5.0) practice scores were related to challenging opportunities ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 2.71$) and outside boundaries ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 2.4$). Similarly the results reveal that employees of Bushenyi district perceive their leaders to occasionally and sometimes set achievable goals and ask 'why' when things do not go as expected.

From the study and consistent with the Gabris and Ihrk's (2000) study, results confirm that leaders in Bushenyi district (with a mean range of 6.45 to 6.88) do sometimes 'challenge the process' – initiate work that is interesting and important. Scholars confirm that 'challenge the process' can be instrumental in promoting personal improvement and fulfilment given the available organisational resources (Kouzes and Posner 1995; Jung and Sosik 2002; Kibort 2004). The results reveal that employees of Bushenyi district do get the opportunity and are allowed to suggest improvements or implement changes, they can feel empowered, connected, and part of the organisation. The results are in agreement with findings of Eisenberger et al. (1997) that employees should be encouraged by leaders to initiate improvements and improve the organisation.

'Challenge the process' involves looking for opportunities to 'change, grow, innovate, and improve' as well as 'experiment, take risks, learn from the accompanying mistakes' (Kouzes and Posner 1995:10), 'questioning assumptions', promoting 'non-traditional thinking' (Tracey and Hinkin 1998; Tucker and Russell 2004), and continuous learning (Torpman 2004) while introducing new ideas and processes (Tucker and Russell 2004) in order to provide change in an organisation (Burns 1978). Leaders should challenge others in order to give them the opportunity to be great individuals and organisations (Kouzes and Posner 2000; Zagorsek et al. 2004). They should also experiment, take risks, and challenge the status quo (Torpman, 2004; Zagorsek et al. 2004).

Bailey (2002) describes relationships as the foundations of success and using Kouzes and Posner's (1987) leadership practices gives simple explanations of these practices. For example, 'challenging' could be to ask questions, rethink ideas, find alternatives, and improve. 'Challenging the process' encompasses finding ways to change the status quo and taking risks in order to improve the way things are done (Kouzes and Posner 2002).

Hence, in accordance with Kouzes and Posner (1987), the study concludes that the ability of employees of Bushenyi district to take risks and see improved results may permit a sense of ‘membership’ in the organisation. Without ‘challenging the process’, the system can be a fruitless and unrewarding organisation rather than a fulfilling supportive workplace that employees want to be in or enjoy working in. Leaders in Bushenyi district should consider encouraging employee input, without fear.

EFFECT OF ‘CHALLENGE THE PROCESS’ ON EMPLOYEE ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Given that a leader’s behaviour influences the perceptions of followers (Bailey 2002), the study examined the association of ‘challenge the process’ and employees’ organisational support. The hypothesis was tested and analysed using the Pearson Correlation 2-tailed test. The test measures the linear dependence between the two study variables (‘challenge the process’ and organisational support). The Pearson correlation gives a value between +1 and -1 inclusive, where 1 is total positive correlation, 0 is no correlation, and -1 is negative correlation.

Consistent with the view that employees form a general belief regarding the organisation’s commitment to them, Eisenberger et al. (1986) reported that employees showed a consistent pattern of agreement with statements concerning whether the organisation appreciated their contributions and would treat them favourably or unfavourably in differing circumstances. The results are shown below.

Table 3: Correlations between ‘Challenging the Process’ and perceived organisational support

		Challenging the process	Perceived organisational support
Challenging the process	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 127	.628(**) .000 127
Perceived organisational support	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.628(**) .000 127	1 127

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 3, the leadership practice of ‘Challenge the process’ and perceived organisational support ($r = .628, p < 0.01$) are related and so the hypothesis is accepted and the null hypothesis is rejected. According to the results, employees of Bushenyi

district local government will give greater organisational support; the higher the perceived leadership practice ‘challenge the process’. Therefore, as advanced by Eisenberger (1990), the local government employees should be supported to initiate change and make decisions, in order to provide and obtain perceived organisational support. This phenomenon is necessary for local governments because: 1) organisations are responsible for their agents’ actions legally, morally, and financially, 2) organisational policies guide the behaviour of its agents at different locations and times, and 3) there is perception consistency of an employee by others in the organisation based on experiences with the employee and a review of their actions as indicated by performance appraisals (Levinson 1965; Eisenberger et al. 1986).

Implicit leadership theories explain the characteristics that followers look for in a leader (Hogan and Kaiser 2005) and are defined by the eyes of those that are led (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Subordinates form perceptions about whether the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being. ‘Furthermore, those who perceive such supporting consideration are likely to infer that such behaviors [sic] and attitudes represent underlying values of the entity and internalize them’ (Bishop, Scott, Goldsby and Cropanzano 2005:155).

According to Allen, Shore and Griffeth (2003), supportive organisational practices are related to employees’ perceived organisational support. Employees tend to personify organisations as they develop perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al. 1986). According to Eisenberger et al. (2001:42), ‘Perceived Organizational Support is an experience-based attribution concerning the benevolent or malevolent intent of the organization’s policies, norms, procedures, and action as they affect employees’. Since employees make attributions about their treatment by the organisation based on the leader’s practices, they also perceive whether or not the leaders favour or disfavour them. Therefore, attributional processes of employees are used to infer organisational support. These attributional processes are based on experience concerning the caring or non-caring intentions of policies, norms, or actions of an organisation that affect employees (Eisenberger et al. 2001).

Several scholars note that when perceived organisational support is high, the employees are influenced to be committed and engage in behaviour that furthers the goals of the organisation (Eisenberger et al. 1990; Shore and Tetrick 1991; Wayne et al. 1997; Randall et al., 1999; Rhodes et al. 2001; Aselage and Eisenberger 2003). Subordinates’ perceived organisational support appreciates the organisation to a greater extent and helps to achieve organisational goals (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rousseau 1989; Wayne et al. 1997; Osca et al. 2005; Aselage and Eisenberger 2003).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The null hypothesis was used to test whether a relationship existed between subordinates’ perceived organisational support and leadership practices using a

survey of perceived organisational support method (Eisenberger et al. 1984) and the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes and Posner 2002). The results of this research article show a significant positive relationship ($r = .628$, $p < 0.01$) between perceived organisational support and ‘challenge the process’ leadership practice. The association of the two variables, with the Pearson correlation coefficient $r = 0.628$ is considered strong.

The study has established the strength of the association between two variables $r = 0.628$. Hence, ‘challenge the process’ leadership practice has significant association with subordinates’ perceived organisational support. However, the Pearson correlation coefficient, r , does not measure the slope of the line of best fit. Also, the Pearson correlation cannot determine a cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, the results do not mean that for every unit increase in one variable there is a .628 unit increase in another.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Leadership of the Busheyi district, in particular, needs to recognise that the core competence of an organisation lies in its human resources (Weymes 2005). People, as a resource to the organisation, spend so much time working with others that they identify with them. At the same time, employees ascribe feelings and characteristics to the organisation (Eisenberger et al. 1990) based on the supervisor’s behavioural traits. This study confirms the vital importance of the fact that leaders should engage in a ‘challenge the process’ type of behaviour to encourage employee commitment and perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al. 1990).

The significant positive relationship ($r = .628$) between ‘challenge the process’ and perceived organisational support implies that leaders need to allow employees to ‘challenge the process’ and leaders can enhance the performance capacity of subordinates by setting high expectations and helping them to address difficult challenges (Bass 1998; Avolio 1999). Interesting and challenging work is an important component of challenging the process and enabling others to act; providing intrinsic motivation for employees to be innovative, flexible, and adaptable to change (Kouzes and Posner 1987; Kibort 2004).

This has outlined a study that indicated a strong association between ‘challenge the process’ and perceived organisational support. This type of leadership practice implies the opportunity to make a difference, to think ‘outside the box’. To experiment with new ideas without fear of disciplinary action or blame for making a mistake increases employee motivation and perceived organisational support. Thus, employees need to be able to try new ideas and ways of doing things (Bass and Avolio 1994; Tracey and Hinkin 1998; Tucker and Russell 2004). Leaders should encourage healthy dissent and allow employees to challenge the process (Bennis 1999).

If leaders do not engage in this leadership practice, it may cost the organisation in terms of performance (Swanson and Johnso, 1975). Leaders should make every effort to support, sustain, maintain, and promote support through the leadership practice of ‘challenging the process’. Leaders who do not use this leadership practice should participate in leadership development programmes emphasising these practices in order to achieve extraordinary outcomes. The researcher concurs with Kouzes and Posner (1987) that extraordinary outcomes are achieved by challenging the process.

NOTE

1. This article is part of the research results during the Ph.D study entitled, ‘Leadership Integrity and Commitment of Local Government Employees in Southwestern Uganda’. Data was collected between February 2013 and September 2013.

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