

Exploring the Relevance of Transformational Leadership Style on Contractors' Health and Safety Management in Nigeria

Okorie, V N (PhD)¹; Okolie, K C. (PhD)²; Ajator, Uche (PhD)³

1 Department of Quantity Surveying, University of Benin, Benin City Nigeria

2 Department of Building Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria

3 Department of Quantity Surveying Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria

Abstract

The importance of leadership for effective health and safety (H&S) management has been the focus of international research for the past decades. In contrast, very little research into leadership and contractor's H&S management has been conducted in Sub-Sahara Africa and Nigeria in particular. Selective reviews of international literature on H&S for leadership research with possible applications in contractor's H&S management was conducted. Emerging findings show the importance of transformational leadership style for contractor's H&S management at all levels of management. Transformational leadership style from the study demonstrates that senior management has shown commitment to organization's H&S. They continuously demonstrate a visible leadership, allocate resources for H&S, approve H&S training for all categories of workers and devote time for H&S matters. Middle level managers lead by examples and foster open communication, while ensuring compliance with H&S management systems. Site supervisors emphasize H&S over productivity, encourage participatory style of leadership and show more concern to worker's health, safety and wellbeing. The study concludes that transformational leadership style promotes trust, two-ways communications, worker participation and H&S compliance, which often results in reduction of site fatalities, injuries and property damage. The study therefore recommends that Nigerian contracting firms whether large, medium or small should embrace this new leadership approach at all levels of management for promotion and sustainability of workplace H&S culture.

Keywords: Contractors, health and safety, management, leadership, relevance, transformational, Nigeria.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Construction industry continues to be one of the most hazardous industries in terms of fatalities, injuries, and disability (Kheni, 2008; Spangenberg, 2009). The National Occupational Safety and

Information Centre (NOSHIC) (Republic of Nigeria, 2006) reports that accidents in the industry are among the highest in all industrial sectors, resulting in a second of all work fatalities after transportation. During the period of 2005 to 2006, the Nigerian construction industry experienced 350 fatalities and over 23 000 disabilities. In addition, there were 180 000 days lost due to injuries and the total loss to the industry was excess of N500 billion. This state of affairs is not peculiar to Nigerian, as poor construction H&S performance is often cited as a global phenomenon. Relying on global statistics, the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2005) reports that:

- Each year there are at least 60 000 fatal accidents on construction sites;
- One in every six fatal accidents at work occurs on construction sites;
- In industrial countries, as many as 25 to 40% of work-related deaths occur on construction sites even though the sector employs only 6 to 10% of the workforce, and
- In some countries, it is estimated that 30% of construction workers suffer from back pain or musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

Apart from the human cost, the economic effects can be devastating (Oloke, 2010). Even though the direct costs of accidents as a result of injuries, illness or property and equipment damage can be insured against, these direct costs are minor when compared with the indirect costs of an accident (Hinze, 2006). Thus, poor H&S leadership culture existing among contracting organizations leads to numerous negative consequences that have financial implications on contractors' profit margin. McAleenan (2010) points that out of £1 of accident cost that an insurance company has to pay out; the contractor could incur £100 in indirect costs. The indirect costs range from product and material damage to legal costs (Hinze, 2006). These costs have an adverse effect on the image and balance sheet of a contracting firm and the national economy.

Research findings indicate that concerted efforts are required by management at all levels within a contracting organization to achieve a sustained improvement in construction H&S performance (Oloke, 2010). Similarly, Hopkins (2006) argues that optimum H&S performance depends largely on effective leadership at all levels of management. Investigation into major accidents in the energy sector in the 1980s revealed that a key component of maintaining safety in high risk industries is the quality of leadership (Flin and Yule, 2003). Pointing out the importance of

leadership in terms of organizational effectiveness, Northouse (2011) stated that no amount of detailed regulations for safety improvements could make up for deficiencies in leadership. Leadership and leaders' commitment to workers' H&S are critical for effective H&S management in any contracting firm. Lees and Austin (2011) argue that leadership is not a panacea to all management problems and state that leaders have been found to often lose focus and become overwhelmed. Nonetheless, leaders have the ability and personality to direct, influence and motivate groups or workers/employees to achieve organizational set goals. Contracting organization's effectiveness including H&S performance has been linked to leadership.

For the past decades, researchers have focused attention most exclusively on the unsafe behaviour of workers, mistakes, omissions, and rule violations as the causes of site accidents. This could be true, as the workers are always on site. It is also necessary to understand the behaviour of the top management, middle managers and supervisors in the chain of accident causation. Lees and Austin (2011) state that it is management who creates the workplace H&S culture and their leadership styles determine or influence workers' H&S behaviour. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the relevance of transformational leadership style on contractor's H&S management.

1.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine the relevance of transformational leadership style of contractors on H&S management at the three levels/tiers of management (senior, middle and site) and recommend transformational leadership approach to Nigerian contracting firms. In this regard, the specific objectives of the study include;

- To explore international literature on H&S leadership with emphasis on transformational leadership styles and its applicability to contractor's H&S management in the Nigerian construction industry;
- To examine transformational leadership styles in line with the contractor's site H&S management; and
- Evaluate transformational leadership styles of senior level managers, middle level managers and site supervisors on H&S management and its relevance to the promotion

and sustainability of construction site H&S performance in the Nigerian construction industry.

2.0 Review of related literature

2.1 Leadership influence on H&S management

Leadership in terms of construction H&S management is a very complex and often subjective issue, but an understanding exists that ‘good H&S is good business’, and the tenet that productivity and H&S are influenced by leadership remains unproven (Flin and Yule, 2003; Northouse, 2011). Around the globe emphasis for organizational effectiveness is shifting from management to leadership. The premise even exists that legislation and trade unions alone cannot improve construction H&S performance substantially (Lee and Austin, 2011). It has been argued that effective H&S management is largely dependent on leadership (Northouse, 2011). It is the right step to accident prevention. Flin and Yule (2003: 45) as well as Lees and Austin (2011), have explored the relevance of leadership in H&S improvement and concluded that transformational leadership styles have greater influence on workers’ H&S behaviour. The importance of leadership as a key driver of a successful organisation was noted by Achua and Lussier (2010). They assert that there is a significant relationship between organisational success and its commitment to leadership practices.

As noted among researchers such as Krause (2003); Geller (2008); Sunindijo and Zou (2012), poor leadership not only impacts on overall project performance and stakeholders profit margins, but also has a major negative impact on workers’ H&S behaviour. The construction industry development board (CIDB) (2011) reports on construction quality in South Africa: a client perspective notes that lack of integrity and openness among leaders in contracting organisation at all levels of management manifest as poor construction quality, cost overrun and workers poor H&S performance. The above statement points out the relevance of leadership and leader’s behaviour for effective management of construction project including workers’ H&S.

Geller (2008) contends that contractor’s effective H&S management depends largely on leadership. Leadership and leader’s behaviour have been associated with organisation success. There is consistent evidence that visible leadership at all levels of management by contractor

could enhance H&S outcomes. These include: reduction in number of site incidents and accidents; reduction in site fatalities; reduction in plant damage and equipment; positive perception of safety climate; higher levels of employee participation, and compliance to safety rules and procedures. Lees and Austin (2011) state that the military style top-down approaches for H&S management no longer achieves the desired results, that transformational leadership model in which managers; behaviour are aimed at encouraging and building teamwork among workers could bring about H&S performance improvement at all levels in an organisation.

2.2 Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership was first articulated by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard in 1990 (Achua and Lussier, 2010). The theory was developed from an earlier work on charisma in political leaders. It postulates three components of leadership: transactional; transformational, and laissez-faire. Transformational leaders are charismatic, inspiring, stimulating and considerate. They provide followers with a sense of purpose; portray an image of success; self-confidence, and self-belief. Transformational leaders articulate share goals and develop mutual understanding and describe an attractive future (Achua and Lussier, 2010). These exceptional leadership qualities could optimise workplace H&S culture in the Nigerian construction industry. Transformational leadership is dominant in many western workplaces today (Lutchman, Maharaj and Ghanem, 2012). This is contrast in the developing countries like Nigeria. However, the absence of transformational behaviour in some contracting firms in the developing countries could be one of the factors contributing to poor H&S performance. Leaders, who exhibit transformational leadership qualities, show genuine concern, transparent, act with integrity, resolve complex problems and support a developmental culture (Lutchman et al., 2012). These types of leadership qualities are needed by Nigerian contractors for effective H&S management.

In the other hand, Northouse (2010) describes transactional leadership as managers and transformational leadership as leaders. He further argues that leaders rated as transformational are described as influential, inspirational and charismatic, whereas leaders rated as transactional are described as task-and reward-oriented. Arguably, construction firms in the developing countries like Nigeria need influential, inspirational and charismatic leaders. However, Flin and

Yule (2003) point out that the differences between transactional and transformational leadership are at opposite ends of a single continuum of leadership. Thus, documented research findings indicate that both are valid approaches for achieving organisational objectives, with transformational leadership showing the most preferred leadership style. In support of the relevance of transformational leadership style for contractor's effective H&S management, Northouse (2010) points out that transformational leader emphasises the importance of group values and are focused on the collective interest of the organisational goals in preference to immediate personal gain. This type of leadership is highly needed by contractors for effective H&S management at all levels. Table 1 illustrates some of the benefits of transformational leadership behaviour on organisational effectiveness including H&S.

Table 1 Benefits of Transformational behaviour

Will create an organizational environment that encourages creativity, innovation, proactive, responsibility and excellence

Have moral authority derived from trustworthiness, competence, sense of fairness, sincerity, purpose and personality

Will create a shared vision, promote involvement consultation and participation

Lead through periods of challenges and intense competition or high growth periods

Promote intellectual stimulation

Usually consider individual capabilities of employees

Are willing to take risks and generate management change

Lead across cultures and international borders

Build strong teams while focusing on macro management

Are charismatic and motivate workers to strong performance

Source: Adapted from Achua and Lussier (2010: 306)

Literature surveys indicate that transformational leadership behaviour demonstrated by management at all levels is associated with a number of H&S related benefits, including reduce levels of site injuries (Krause, 2003), positive perception of site H&S compliance (Hopksin, 2006), higher levels of employees H&S participation and H&S citizenship (Lutchman el al, 2012). However, transformational leadership is not without its short coming, Hopkins (2006)

states that transformational leaders put much emphasis on subordinate in preference to workers. Nonetheless, transformational leadership styles by senior managers, middle managers and supervisor is about visible leadership and consistent commitment to worker's H&S. Leaders that demonstrate integrity, trust and openness can motivate and win the heart of workers and this is what is required to change workers unsafe behaviour to safe behaviour leading to optimal H&S performance.

2.3 Senior managers

Senior management commitment is crucial to positive H&S management in any contracting firm (Krause, 2003). In similar manner, Behm (2005) maintain that the top management is 'the engine' that drives construction H&S management towards the goal of sustaining and maintaining an H&S work environment. Though most senior managers for example Chief Executive Office or Directors tend to be located away from the operational sites, their responsibilities are at a strategic level such as long term planning. However, they are ultimately responsible for organizational H&S policies (Oloke, 2010), allocation of financial resources for H&S (Lu and Yang, 2010), approves H&S training of workers (Lutchman et al, 2012), and assign responsibility to managers and supervisors (McAleenan, 2010). In fact, organization H&S is grown and nurtured by top leaders. Krause (2003) argues that it is the top management leadership, behaviour and commitment that influence or determine the behaviour of manager, supervisors and workers. Beside the strategic decisions and provision of financial resources for H&S, top management in any contracting firm can demonstrate their commitment to workers' H&S by showing concern for people, encouraging participatory styles of leadership in managers and supervisors, be clear and consistent in their support for H&S and develop trust among workers (Hopkins, 2006). When workers have trust on senior management, they will give their best both in production safe behaviour.

King, Lunn and Michaelis (2010) conducted a qualitative study on Directors' motivation to lead on H&S and the types of leadership practices that they implemented. The theme of their interviews include: physically displaying of up-to-date H&S information that employees could refer to; carrying out H&S shop floor inspections; providing safety equipment and relevant training to employees; using committees to keep up to date with H&S issues, and having dedicated H&S managers or seeking H&S advice from external consultants. The findings

suggest that there were variations in how Directors demonstrated a visible commitment to safety and the types of leadership practices they employed. However, they concluded that leading by example was viewed as an important element for effective leadership by many Directors interviewed. Directors need to demonstrate visible leadership and commitment to H&S. Leading by example and showing concern for the welfare of workers by top management are characteristics of transformational leaders (Northouse, 2011).

2.4 Middle managers

Brauer (2005) argue that managers play a crucial role in promoting site H&S management. Studies comparing low and high accident plants have shown that on the safest sites, managers who demonstrated visible leadership, and acted as planner, an organiser, and a good role model for others, realise excellent H&S performance (Hinze, 2006). In terms of direct effects, managers can demonstrate their commitment to workers' H&S by prioritising H&S over productivity when production conflicts with H&S (Flin and Yule, 2003). These leadership attributes are in consistent with transformational leadership qualities that can transform supervisors and workers H&S behaviour on site. Conversely, Sunidijo and Zou (2012) point out that lack of leadership qualities and interpersonal skills have been found to negatively impact on managers in promoting a positive H&S culture. Hinze (2006) concurs and states that a site with a poor H&S performance is one with an autocratic leader who is mostly dogmatic and lacks good human relations.

Two studies examined the relationship between managers' openness and support for safety and safety-related outcomes, including safe working. The findings suggest that supportive leadership (transformational) demonstrated by managers results in safe working (Hopkins, 2006), and promotes communication of safety and lower levels of reported injury cases (Mullen, 2005). Similarly, Lu and Yang (2010) examined the impact of managers' active involvement in safety activities on safety outcomes. Their findings show that active involvement of managers in safety activities is associated with positive perceptions of safety climate and increased levels of employee accountability and responsibility for H&S.

Documented research findings have shown that managers who show empathy and genuine concern for workers' health, safety and welfare can retain them longer and motivate them to achieve higher performance (Lutchman et al. 2012). Flin, and Yule (2003) also argue that on sites where the managers show transformational leadership qualities, employees are motivated, which translates to commitment leading to better H&S behaviour of workers.

2.5 Supervisors

The supervisor is the key man in construction site H&S management. Supervisors act as a conduct between senior management and the workforce and play an important role in shaping workers' understanding of what is expected of them, by communicating H&S to the workers (Naoum, 2011). They know the workers problems as they are always with them. Undoubtedly, supervisors have major influence on workers' H&S behaviours. Lingard, Blimas and Wakefield (2005) conducted research on effect of supervisory leadership style on group level safety climate and concluded that lack of commitment and leadership qualities among supervisors are contributing factors to unsafe conditions and unsafe acts found on sites. On this regard, Northouse (2010) argues that supervisor needs leadership and management training to empower them for their important roles. Copper (2010 cited Fleming, 2001) who examined the impact of supervisory safety management practices and safety climate on subordinates self-report risk taking and safety behaviour. The study showed that where supervisors lead by examples, workers are motivated to work safely and engage in less risk-taking.

Findings from literature also show that frequent H&S interaction between supervisors and site workers lead to an improvement in worker H&S behaviour. In addition, a study that examined the effectiveness of transformational leadership as a supervisory style for safety showed that workers are motivated to work safely and engage in less risk-taking (Naoum, 2011). It has also be found that participatory leadership of supervisor was significantly related to workers H&S commitment and lower accident and incidents on construction site (Lutchman et al, 2012).

3.0 Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on transformational leadership and construction H&S management in order to highlight possible application to contractors' H&S management. There are few studies of leadership in contractors' H&S management in Nigeria,

so it is necessary to extrapolate from studies that have been conducted in the western world. Literature surveys suggest that transformational leadership may be an appropriate model for improving contractors' H&S management at all levels of management. It is equally prudent to state that no single leadership style has the solution for a complex industry such as construction (Lee and Austin, 2011). Studies by Krause (2003); Flin and Yule (2003), Northouse (2010); Lutchman et al. (2012) have established the existence of a strong link between leadership and positive H&S outcome.

Autocratic, democratic and transactional leadership styles when properly applied can positively influence workers H&S behaviour. For instance, transactional leaders according to (Northouse, 2010) may develop workers to higher levels of maturity and interpersonal skills among site managers and supervisors. In contrast, leaders who take action when something goes wrong and do not encourage workers to develop their potential and contribute to decision making processes may not properly align with the cooperation needed for effective construction H&S management by contracting firm.

Examining the relevance or theoretical rationale for transformational leadership styles will reveal that it is highly applicable to influencing H&S behaviour of workers. This is because transformational leader encourages workers to subscribe to group and organisational goals in preference to personal gain (Lu and Yang, 2012). Transformational leaders set examples for workers, which are consistent with the organisational values and expectations, through exemplary behaviour (Achua and Lussier, 2010). This behaviour should be emulated by Nigerian construction managers.

Lees and Austin (2011) state that the military command (top-down) approaches for H&S management no longer achieving the desired results, and consequently injuries and accidents continue to occur at alarming rates. Transformational leadership models, in which leaders' behaviour is aimed at encouraging participation and building teamwork among workers, could realise H&S performance improvement at all levels in contracting firm. Further transformational leadership style emphasises two-ways flow of communication, free environmental accident reporting and investigation. In addition, leaders must demonstrate genuine care for all workers and make H&S a part of the organisation's work culture (Luria, 2011). For instance, when a

worker bypasses H&S standards to improve production and this is ignored by management, workers are lead to believe this is acceptable to management. This is in parallel with transformational leadership principles that is being advocated here.

Empowering workers through H&S education and training will result in greater job satisfaction, organisational commitment and higher productivity (Geller, 2008). Indeed, transformational leaders encourage workers to think outside then box. This entails that management must invest in workers' education and training that will lead to better project performance including workers' H&S.

Transformational behaviour has a moral authority derived from trustworthiness, competence, sense of fairness, sincerity, purpose and personality. Therefore, honesty and integrity of organisational leaders are absolute requirements for creating a motivated workforce and improving workplace H&S culture.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In all intents, this paper seeks to bring to fore the transformational leadership style that has been used for decades by the Western World contractors for effective H&S management in contrast to Nigerian contractors.

Senior managers, middle managers and supervisors in most contracting firms in the developing countries have not received training on leadership and interpersonal skills. The big challenge for contracting firms in the developing countries such as Nigeria is to identify and then train managers at all levels of management to acquire a leadership skill that will improve workers H&S behaviour beyond the current levels. This paper has attempted to provide a first step to achieving this by presenting evidence of appropriateness of transformational leadership for contractor's effective H&S management. It is therefore recommended that this style of leadership should be adopted by contracting firms in the Nigerian construction industry.

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