

THE MANAGEMENT OF LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

(Text of a Lecture given at Caleb University, Nigeria)

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Protocols.

May I begin by saying how grateful I am for this opportunity to come to Caleb University for the purpose of sharing some thoughts on the topic of leadership, one of the subjects that have occupied my interest and attention for the past five decades. Let me also register my admiration for the Vice-Chancellor, Faculty and Students of the university for promoting this kind of dialogue at which we can apply our combined intelligence to the consideration of topics of consuming contemporary interest. Especially in these times when the idea of a national dialogue in Nigeria is being positively contemplated, it is appropriate to remind ourselves that discussions are some of the best means of ensuring that we truly understand issues, especially if we come to such opportunities with a positive attitude and an open mind. We need the open mind, not only to contribute our own constructive ideas, but also to listen productively to what others may have to say.

Why discuss leadership?

Someone may well ask, 'What good reason do we have for discussing the subject of leadership?' Our immediate answer, as Nigerians living in this country in the 21st century, is that we tend to blame most of the problems and difficulties that we experience today on a failure of leadership. Those who say this may have a point, although I would suggest that the excuse is, in itself rather simplistic, and needs to be closely examined to test its validity. What better place for such examination than at a forum that has university faculty and students as participants.

However, the alleged poor performance of current leaders is not the main reason for discussing leadership. If we look closely, we will acknowledge the fact that

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leadership plays a key role in determining the quality and effectiveness of performance *in institutions and organizations across the many strata of society. In societies that can justifiably boast of having good leaders, it is universally accepted that good leadership is a key driver of great performance (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2001). Another important point is that we

often limit our concept of leadership to only those visible and high-level positions to which people are either formally elected or appointed, whereas, as pointed out by Achua and Lussier (2013), leadership, in fact, is “*everyone’s business*”. In support of that assertion, we see, every day, that leadership is needed in every place and at every level where decisions have to be made. These and other considerations make it reasonable for us to examine how we, individually and collectively, can add some value to the practice of leadership from the viewpoint of the disciplined study that we already practice in our search for knowledge through analysis and research at this university. We also know that, in the not-so-distant future, we will be called upon to apply the benefits of our current study to our own practice of leadership after university.

How does one become a leader?

The need to apply the outcome of our university learning to real life raises a question that is sometimes discussed – ‘Are leaders born or made?’ Is it possible for someone who is not naturally ‘leader material’ to be developed into a leader by a process of study or apprenticeship? When we choose to discuss the management of leadership opportunity, is such opportunity available for everyone or only to those who are ‘born’ to be leaders? If we are to succeed in our quest to discover how to manage leadership opportunities, we must give adequate attention to the consideration of this interesting question.

Relying on the copious study that has been made of leaders across the world over so many decades, we should be able to see clearly that leadership involves **traits** or **characteristics** that are associated with people in positions of responsibility – (e.g., intelligence, initiative, self-confidence, dominance). Leaders also need **skills** – (problem-solving, decision-making, interpersonal) that can be learned and improved upon as one progresses in the practice of leadership. Leaders also develop **styles** of leadership, and learn to apply a whole range of styles in different situations. Moreover, as circumstances change and new people join the ranks of personnel available to manage changing situations, leaders also learn **adjustment**, which enables them to deal with the changes in a proactive manner.

These factors have led some scholars to adopt the position which describes leaders as “**tenants of time and context**”, reminding us that leaders who are effective in one situation may be totally redundant in another, depending on the changes that have taken place in the meantime. We are reminded, for instance, of the fact that Winston Churchill was an eminently effective wartime leader of Britain, but lost the first post-war election to Clement Atlee when Britain needed to choose a leader for peace time. We are also witnesses to the reality that

leaders who spearheaded the fight for national independence in former colonies often become somewhat unhappy in their performance when it comes to coordinating the efforts of a sovereign people in the task of national development.

Our conclusion from all this must be that, for effective leadership, natural traits and characteristics are useful but not sufficient in themselves. Particularly because the leader of today has to be competent in leading people through rapidly changing situations, leaders must develop skills and competencies that effectively address the emerging contexts within which they operate. Which also suggests that the opportunity for leadership will come, not only to those who seem to have been born with certain relevant traits, but also to all who must prepare themselves for positions where they will have to exercise directive responsibility for the lives and fortunes of other people.

What is leadership for?

To succeed in managing the opportunities that we have to practice leadership, we first need to understand what we are talking about. So, it is customary to begin by asking – ‘What is leadership?’

Some research scholars believe that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it (Stodgill, 1974). For instance, one scholar sees leadership as *“a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”* (Northouse, 2010). That definition serves, at least, to warn us that leadership is not merely a trait or characteristic belonging to the leader, but a “transactional” happening between people. It also highlights the fact that the leader and his/her followers have a predetermined goal towards which they are directing their efforts. However, as we have already observed, this is only one of the many definitions that have emerged in leadership literature, and some of us at this forum may, indeed, have other definitions that we prefer.

What I would recommend is that we work our way round the challenge of finding a universally acceptable definition by asking, ‘What is leadership for?’ What does leadership enable us to do, which would be difficult for us to achieve without it? Raising this kind of query probably provoked the view expressed by Simon Cooper (2008) that *“leadership is about creating an environment where people consistently perform to the best of their ability”*. Another useful concept, but I think we need to break it down into its component elements.

In particular, those who are responsible for governance in institutions and communities, have a charter to which they should endeavour to be faithful. Governance is a leadership

activity, and those who govern should never forget that leaders cannot afford to ignore certain demands of their leadership charter:

- Leaders must know the real objectives of the organization, and the mission to which it has committed itself; they must also find effective ways of articulating the objectives and communicating them to all concerned. Sharing the vision and mission of the organization makes it possible for all participants to understand and accept the corporate programme, and to combine their efforts in a unified thrust towards the same goal.
- Leaders must be able to find credible ways of pursuing the organization's objectives within the time and the resources available; they must ensure that they empower their people to formulate strategies and policies that support the corporate mission;
- Leaders must be able to come up with acceptable and effective ways of improving the organization's ability to find or generate additional resources when such resources are needed to ensure the attainment of the standards to which organizational effort has been committed.;
- Leaders must see the selection, appointment, development and retention of good quality people as one of their main responsibilities. In the face of rapidly changing environmental circumstances, only organizations that have capable people are likely to do well. This is the concept that underlies one definition of leadership which asserts that leadership *"is the building of people through the accomplishing of tasks, as this improves the chances of attaining success today, and builds the capacity for achieving more success in the future."*
- Leaders must put in place a corporate culture that promotes the teamwork and collaboration that are essential in a community that exists and strives for one shared purpose;
- Leaders must give a substantial part of their time and attention to caring for the interests of the individual members of the organization. A leader's consistent practice of positive interpersonal skills enables high levels of communication among fellow players, especially if it emphasizes the need, not only to speak to one another, but also to listen constructively to the contributions of other members of the team.
- In addition to demonstrating their commitment to high productivity among members, leaders must institute high values and standards in every facet of the organization's activities, and supervise the consistent application of those values and standards in the

running of their affairs. An organization that practices respectable ethics fills its stakeholders with confidence and a commitment to work for the shared purpose.

- As the leaders of the corporate initiative, people in leadership responsibility must be exemplary in their commitment to the corporate cause, and in the diligence with which they carry out their own responsibilities. They should recall Francis Bacon's words of wisdom, stating that leaders who offer good precept and also show a good example may be seen as people who build with both hands; those, however, who accompany good precept with their own bad example are building with one hand, and tearing down with the other.

The charter that we have just discussed suggests that the effective leader maintains a steady focus on the following important factors that promote success, viz: **Purpose, strategy, performance, people, results, ethics, and the future.** These factors are important in all situations in which the opportunity for leadership is present.

Opportunities for showing leadership

No human being starts life as a leader; rather, we all begin as followers of parents and senior siblings who both teach and show their infant protege those things that should give them the best chance of a competent existence in the world. We are not often mindful of the superior quality of the skills of learning and imitation that the child uses in coming to the expression of his own personality when the time is ripe. The natural development process that comes easily to the infant could be the starting point for growing into truly competent leadership if maintained in the initial, near-pure condition. As we have observed before, we are all born with certain traits that fit us naturally for leadership. However, we are soon exposed to other influences outside the family circle, and we have the natural ability to acquire both knowledge and attitudes from our other contacts. In other words, whatever natural traits we may have, they are influenced and developed as we go through school, and as we take up membership or participation in the affairs of organizations and institutions. We may even find ourselves eventually taking up the challenge of political or governance leadership.

Our point here is that the very first opportunity of demonstrating or experiencing leadership occurs in the family. Later on, we go to school, and may be appointed or chosen for the role of class monitor, group leader or prefect. In the work place after school, we sometimes become leader of a team or representative of a group of our colleagues. Later still, we may become head of our institution; or, in the general society, chief of our clan or leader of a community. We may describe this as the gradual construction of a leadership development

career. In reality, we are the beneficiaries of a succession of opportunities to lead, and we succeed or fail depending on how competently we recognize and exploit – i.e., manage - the particular opportunity.

It is important to note that the management of any leadership opportunity is the joint endeavour of two distinct parties. First, there is the organization or community that offers the leadership opportunity by appointing the individual to a position of responsibility. The second party, of course, is the individual himself or herself who takes up the responsibility. Clearly, it is the task of the organization to make sure that the individual has the potential to carry the burden of responsibility that is being thrust upon him. However well or badly that has been done, it then becomes the job of the individual to make the best of the opportunity that he is being offered.

Management of opportunity by the organization

As we have just pointed out, an organization that seeks to assign the leadership responsibility at any level must make the effort to select the best individual for the task. The potential leader's fitness should be tested, by ascertaining, for example, what is the ***track record of the individual*** in the performance of any responsibility that he has managed before this time. Does he possess many of the important attributes of a leader, such as ***competence, courage, the right values, standards, discipline and stamina?*** Can the organization specify, in clear terms, ***the results*** that the leader is expected to achieve? Does the leader have a ***commitment to a sustainable future*** for the endeavour of the enterprise? Is he ready to pursue his own ***self-development*** through learning all that he must know to manage the changes that will occur in the environment?

Does the organization operate a selection system that enables its people to ***grow into leadership*** by creating opportunities for acquiring cognate experience in lower-level positions, and by organizing development and training for aspiring leaders? In advancing people to senior leadership jobs, does the organization make sure that only those who demonstrate the right leadership attributes get promoted?

These and other similar questions need to be asked and answered satisfactorily; only then can the organization claim to be playing its proper role in the management of leadership opportunity.

Management of opportunity by the individual

Some of us become leaders because of the formal position that we occupy in an organization, thus becoming the recipient of "assigned leadership." However, the person assigned to a leadership role does not always become the real leader, mainly because

leadership is not established in reality unless the followers and other participants acknowledge the individual as the most influential member in the pursuit of the objectives of the group. In other words, no matter what the title assigned to the individual, he becomes the practitioner of an “emergent leadership” only when other people in the group accept and support his leadership (Northouse, 2010). His leadership is established in reality only if he has people who follow him because they are willing to be led by him.

Arising from this important point, there is another definition that sees leadership as: ***an influence relationship between leaders and followers through which they effect changes that must be made for the realization of their mutual purposes.*** This makes eminently good sense if we assess the leader’s success and effectiveness on the basis of his getting his whole team to destination. Clearly, the whole team will finally get home at a time determined by the arrival of the slowest member, and it is the leader’s task to do all that is necessary to bring the team home intact and in good time!

From all that we have said so far, we can draw some conclusions that should be useful for the individual who seeks to transform his “assigned leadership” opportunity into an “emergent leadership” reality. First, how does the leader see himself? We have already shown that a real leader must have people who follow him because they accept and support his leadership. Obviously, this is easier to achieve if the leader is sensitive to the reality that he becomes the leader largely because he is, first, a member of the team. Without a valid membership, he cannot be the leader; he is only the first among the members, and this means that he is committed to the purpose of the endeavour, and willing to respect team discipline.

While the initial authority of the leader may derive from his appointment or election into a position, his leadership becomes established and sustainable only if he performs his own tasks in an exemplary way. As we have mentioned before, the leader’s personal example is his best platform for ensuring that he can remain the leader. Exemplary performance in a constantly changing situation requires the leader to be a ‘learning leader’, always seeking innovative ways of keeping up with changing circumstances.

This need for continuous learning is a crucial element in the leader’s management of his opportunity. Leadership has been described as a “lifelong learning journey” (Owen, Hodgson, Gazzard, 2004) that helps the leader to discover who he is, and to establish a purpose for life and leadership. The leader succeeds in reaping the benefits of learning only if he opens himself to every challenge and learning opportunity that he comes across. Moreover, in the end, it is the best way of staying ahead of the game, making sure that the leader does not lag behind his

followers as they take full advantage of all the modern resources of advancing technology in equipping themselves for their role in the organization.

Developing new leaders

We have said, a number of times, that a leader should actively work for a future of sustainable good performance for the organization. The best way of ensuring this is to promote the emergence of younger people into leadership through a well-thought-out plan of leadership development in the organization. As we look at all the countries around the world, we must be struck by the fact that leaders in the nations that are regarded as advanced seem to be getting younger, while a higher proportion of leaders in the emerging nations appear to have been in charge for quite long periods! Here at home, even where leaders appear to be in their middle age or thereabouts, it often appears as if the real strings of leadership are pulled hither and thither by older hands behind the curtain. If current signals reflect the truth, two or three of the contestants for president next year will be people who first became leaders, or have been contesting for leadership, for the last 25 to 30 years! This implies the total absence of one entire generation in what should be the natural succession to leadership in our nation.

The misuse of leadership opportunity

No wonder, then, that we feel that leadership is failing in our country. One of the reasons must be the fact that the candidates in the age range between 30 and 50 are not as active as they should be in taking leadership responsibility. If, as we have agreed, "leaders are, indeed, tenants of time and context", it should be obvious that some of the current leaders are out of phase with their proper context, and have actually run out of time! To our regret, we know that such so-called leaders do not willingly surrender what they perceive as their leadership power base. It is, therefore, up to the true candidates for today's leadership to stand up and register a credible contention for their opportunity. The validity of this argument does not rest only on the age factor; in fact, the real justification lies in the fact that current leadership practice reflects a large number of ideas and concepts that have outlived their usefulness.

Take, for instance, the obvious confusion of priorities among some current leaders, whereby they pursue self interest above the interest of the corporation or community that they have volunteered to lead. And this, in spite of the fact that they actually swear an oath, as required by the constitution, that they will always do the opposite. Take also, the apparent disdain for truth and justice, reflected in the reality that the system does not seem capable of sanctioning leaders who misbehave. Indeed, we actually promote irresponsible leadership by granting leaders immunity from any crimes they may commit while in office! Surely, this provision goes against the trend of responsible leadership in the rest of the world!

Consider also the many instances of abuse of the authority and privileges of office, and the disdain for true accountability to which we have already made reference. Going by the prevalent rhetoric in the public space today, is it not obvious that leaders have placed their focus on politics at the expense of governance? Is it not also clear that selection for advancement to higher responsibility in many places is now driven more by patronage than by performance? Do we need many more illustrations of the misuse and mismanagement of leadership opportunity that is rampant in our society?

The point bears repeating for needful emphasis. The failure of leadership in Nigeria today is twin pronged: many current leaders are failing because they have exhausted their fitness for the leadership responsibility. Their interest now seems to be centred exclusively on the material benefits of leadership access. At the same time, the younger generation that should now be leading actively is largely absent because it does not have the heart to embrace the leadership challenge, or because it allows itself to acquiesce in the methods and self-interest preferences of the ones who have outlived their relevance and entitlement.

New opportunities, new leaders?

Perhaps this is a good point at which we should turn our attention to that part of the Nigerian community that is represented by the participants at this forum. You, our students and faculty at Caleb, are yet to claim your place in the leadership roles that are visible in the general public space. At the same time, you have utilized leadership opportunities within your families and in the primary and secondary schools that you attended, and some of you are currently occupying leadership positions among your own groups within this institution of tertiary education. As a bonus, you are actually taking time out to study and learn, not only the particular academic material that will earn you degrees at some future time soon, but also, you should be learning how to exercise the kind of positive leadership that we have been discussing this morning.

I venture to assert that you, and your contemporaries up and down the country, are the ones upon whom we must build our hopes, and construct the programme of good management of leadership opportunity in the coming years. I have no doubt that you are already familiar with the imperatives of value-adding leadership, and I would merely suggest that, as the future rolls along, you should not fail to give intelligent consideration to the following fundamental points.

Managing your leadership opportunities

1. The leader succeeds best by working sincerely for the good of the corporate body, not for selfish or narrow interests. It should be obvious that a society that is in wholesome

condition is best able to provide for the genuine welfare of its citizens. Where the community itself is in poor shape, the prospects for the individual are pretty dim.

2. Good values form the best basis for taking positive leadership decisions. Good values not only cater to the best interests of people; they also ensure that we will all pursue an agenda of peaceful coexistence. If we engage in unlawful acts that endanger other people's life and limb, we lose the peace and jeopardize the future of our community.
3. The leader should be a person of high standards, always able to show a good example in his own work and relationships. This enables other members of the group to fix their focus on ennobling standards as well, and the general tone of the entire community is uplifted.
4. Self discipline is an essential factor of the leader's success, and facilitates his ability to learn and to develop his leadership capacity. It is also the best way of ensuring that he will always have the moral right to demand consistent best practice from his people.

Of course, there will be challenges, and you may be experiencing some of them already. Expect challenges in the following areas:

- **People**: Finding the right mix to work with, and gaining and retaining their commitment.
- **Interpersonal skills**: The ability to communicate effectively, and to apply the right leadership style to each situation.
- **Power & authority**: Knowing the right balance, and using both to achieve the desired objectives of the endeavour.
- **Courage & strength**: The will to stand firm in the face of opposition, and the readiness to admit when one is in error.
- **Learning**: The ability and readiness to learn and to pursue self-development.
- **Values, ethics, standards**: Standing for, and operating with the right values at all times.
- **Empowerment**: Progressively encouraging members of the team to enter into leadership roles, and thus preparing the leaders of the future.
- **Accountability**: Readiness to be judged by the quality of one's own leadership performance.
- **Example**: Showing the way to followers by personal example.

Conclusion

As I close my remarks, I wonder if we now feel able to address one of our earlier questions – Are leaders born or made? Considering the many decades over which that question has agitated people's minds across the globe, we are probably not going to put it to

rest today at this brief interaction. However, I believe we have said enough to show that everyone has some seed of leadership performance that has been planted early in life in the family setting. We start with a natural capacity for learning through imitation, and if we develop this, the seed that was planted in infancy may show up as leadership traits when the need arises in later life. However that may be, we will become successful and effective leaders if we seize every opportunity to learn the right things, and to develop our capacity for applying what we learn to the leadership activity. If we are fortunate enough to come across the kind of uplifting opportunity that is offered here at Caleb, there is no reason at all why we should not go on to become the leaders that Nigeria so desperately needs – leaders that will use the copious God-given resources of this country to join in building a nation that will, once again, earn the respect of the rest of the world.

Leaders should always remind themselves of the National Pledge, wherein we offer to **serve** the country rather than ourselves, and wherein we volunteer to use all our strength and other resources to uphold the dignity of our fatherland – So help us, God!

Once again, I thank the Vice-Chancellor, Faculty and Students of Caleb University for this opportunity to share my thoughts on the issue of managing our leadership opportunities. Thank you all for your impressive attention.

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