Dilemma of Leadership Development: Reconciling Competency Models and Contextual Realities in a Changing World

Author:
Prof. Vicente C. Sinining, PhD, PDCILM
ORCID: 0000-0002-2424-1234

Abstract

Leadership development continues to be a pivotal component in shaping resilient, innovative, and ethical institutions across sectors. However, the field is fraught with dilemmas—between universal competency models and context-specific needs, between transactional efficiency and transformational vision, and between short-term outcomes and long-term impact. This paper explores the tensions inherent in leadership development frameworks, critiques mainstream models, and proposes an integrated, context-sensitive approach grounded in empirical evidence. Drawing from case studies in education, government, and business sectors, particularly in the Global South, the paper offers a reimagined framework that reconciles global leadership theories with local cultural dynamics. The study emphasizes the need to shift from static leadership pipelines to dynamic leadership ecosystems that are inclusive, adaptive, and anchored in values-based learning.

Keywords

Leadership Development, Leadership Dilemma, Competency Models, Transformational Leadership, Leadership Ecosystems, Global South, Organizational Culture, Contextual Leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership development is heralded as a critical strategic imperative in a world marked by complexity, volatility, and accelerated change (Day & Dragoni, 2015). From government institutions navigating governance reforms to private corporations cultivating agile executives, the investment in leadership programs has grown exponentially over the past two decades.

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However, the effectiveness of these programs remains contested. The dilemma lies in the over-reliance on rigid competency models that often ignore the contextual and cultural dynamics of leadership (Bolden & Gosling, 2006). This paper addresses the core paradoxes of leadership development and argues for a reframing that prioritizes adaptability, equity, and contextual intelligence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Competency-Based Approaches

Leadership has historically been framed through competency-based lenses—highlighting skills, behaviors, and traits leaders are expected to exhibit (Boyatzis, 1982). Such models undergird widely adopted frameworks like the **Kouzes and Posner Leadership Practices Inventory** (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) and **Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model** (Goleman, 2000). These frameworks offer clarity and measurability but often suffer from cultural and contextual myopia.

2.2 Contextual and Cultural Critiques

Recent scholarship critiques the universality of leadership traits, advocating instead for culturally embedded and context-sensitive leadership paradigms (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). The **GLOBE Study**, for instance, revealed that leadership perceptions vary widely across regions—what is deemed effective in North America may be ineffective in Sub-Saharan Africa (House et al., 2004).

2.3 Leadership in the Global South

In postcolonial settings, leadership development faces dual challenges: bridging traditional governance systems and modern institutional practices (Mangaliso, 2001). The Global South context exposes the inadequacy of imported leadership models and calls for indigenous

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frameworks that honor local knowledge, communal values, and historical legacies (Nkomo, 2011).

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3. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative meta-synthesis** and **multiple case study analysis**, examining leadership development programs across three domains:

- **Higher Education Leadership in Rwanda and the Philippines**
- **Municipal Governance in Sierra Leone**
- **Corporate Leadership Pipelines in Emerging Markets**

Data was drawn from interviews with leadership trainers, content analysis of program curricula, and participant observation of leadership workshops conducted from 2020 to 2024.

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4. Key Dilemmas in Leadership Development

4.1 The Universality vs. Local Relevance Dilemma

Global leadership models are frequently exported wholesale into diverse contexts with little adaptation. For instance, leadership development curricula in African universities often mirror Western MBA programs with minimal contextual alignment (Amutabi, 2020). This misalignment reduces effectiveness and can erode local leadership legitimacy.

4.2 The Efficiency vs. Transformation Dilemma

Organizations tend to prioritize short-term performance outcomes—such as ROI or productivity—over deeper, slower transformational change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Yet,

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transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, values, and capacity-building, is more sustainable in the long term.

4.3 The Formal vs. Informal Learning Dilemma

Leadership development often happens informally—through mentorship, lived experience, and critical incidents. However, most programs are formalized in structured training modules. This creates a disjuncture between how leadership is taught and how it is actually developed in practice (Raelin, 2004).

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5. Case Studies and Findings

Case Study 1: Education Sector – University of Rwanda & Philippine Normal University

Both institutions implemented competency-based leadership development for department heads. However, follow-up evaluations showed limited transfer to real-world leadership behavior due to misalignment with local institutional cultures and hierarchical decision-making patterns.

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Case Study 2: Public Governance – Sierra Leone Local Councils

Leadership training under donor-funded decentralization reforms emphasized fiscal accountability and transparency. However, tribal affiliations and customary law systems continued to exert greater influence than the acquired formal competencies.

Case Study 3: Private Sector – Agribusiness Leadership in East Africa

Emerging agribusiness leaders thrived more under apprenticeship models and peer networks than under formal workshops. Social capital and communal values played an outsized role in leadership credibility.

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6. Towards a New Framework: The Adaptive Leadership Ecosystem

To address the identified dilemmas, this paper proposes the **Adaptive Leadership Ecosystem (ALE)**—a framework with the following components:

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Pillar	Description
Contextual Intelligence	Leadership learning is grounded in local socio-cultural-political realities
Relational Leadership	Focus on trust-building, empathy, and collective problem-solving
Experiential Learning	Leadership as practiced through projects, not just theorized in classrooms
Equity and Inclusion	Prioritize leadership access across gender, class, and ethnic divides

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Pillar	Description
Feedback and Reflection	Continuous learning through structured reflection loops

This model aligns with Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership principles while integrating regional contextualization and decolonial perspectives.

7. Discussion

7.1 Reframing Leadership Success

Leadership success cannot be measured solely by promotion rates or organizational KPIs. Instead, broader indicators such as **community impact**, **ethical behavior**, and **social trust** must be incorporated (Maak & Pless, 2006).

7.2 Policy Implications

Donors, educational institutions, and private firms must abandon one-size-fits-all solutions. Leadership development should be co-created with local actors and evaluated based on relevance, not just outcomes.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The dilemma of leadership development is not merely pedagogical; it is fundamentally philosophical and political. Leadership cannot be taught through imported templates alone. It must be cultivated in the fertile ground of cultural wisdom, lived experiences, and ethical imagination. Future programs should:

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- Design **modular, adaptive curricula** tailored to specific contexts
- Leverage **mentorship and informal learning** networks
- Embed **critical reflection** and **community engagement** in every leadership journey
- Integrate **indigenous knowledge systems** in leadership paradigms

In the end, leadership development is not a pipeline but an ecosystem—and ecosystems thrive through diversity, resilience, and reciprocity.

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