

**THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC LEADERS IN CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT****Abdikarim Ibrahim Abdow****PhD Student, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology****P.O box 1106-70100, Garissa.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The globalization has converted the world into a small global village; a village in which there is an ever high stream of contentions and competitions between organizations. In this scenario the most effective and beneficial maneuver for any organization is to create innovative ways in conducting business. This paper deals with the role of strategic leadership in a challenging environment. The leader as a person in charge or as a change agent can manage an organization or the process of organizational change more effectively and successfully if h/she is capable and competent. Rapid technological advancements, high expectations of customers, and ever changing market situations have compelled organizations to incessantly reassess and reevaluate how they work and to understand, adopt and implement changes in their business model in response of changing trends. Strategic leadership is a demand of the day, and needed for organizations to survive. Organizations now a days, well understand the importance of the matter, and are serious to prepare themselves not only the current, but also for the future trends to get the level of sustainable success, but Along with all of its implications and importance the process of strategic leadership is also very complex and challenging. Research shows that 70 percent of leaders fail to get their goals. As leadership has a central role in evolution and cultivating an organization, the process of organizational change demands a very effective and highly competent leadership that is well capable to perceive the most desirable shape of an organization and address the issue of environmental change in most appropriate way. The analysis of literature reviewed and the results of real life cases of organizations which are studied for this paper shows, that a leadership with the competencies of “Vision” and “Innovative Approach” along with other characteristics can prove more effective to conclude the complex

phenomena of environmental change with success. Further the successful strategic leader can leads to innovation for organization, which is the key of long term success and sustainability.

**Keywords:** *Strategic leadership, environment, competition, organization and Strategy*

## Introduction

Every individual has some dreams and goals for h/her betterment, improvement or successful future. But unfortunately only having dreams and goals is not sufficient. We need to take practical steps and actions to get them in a better way, and these steps and actions demand different kind of knowledge, skills and talent to become successful.

Likewise in order to get the level of long term success and sustainability the organizations need to take some practical steps. While talking about these practical steps for organizations, the scholars and researchers are agree that organizations need to accept, adopt and implement changes in their business model according to changing trends, technologies, customer preferences and future concerns. Many authors write massively in this area. At the one end when, Caetano takes the organizational change as a demand of time to remain successful in business (Caetano, 2009) Boston, at the other end claims that organizational change is important for long term success and survival of an organization. There are possibilities for organizations to lose their repute and market share if they do not prepare themselves according to rapidly changing circumstances and situations. (Boston, MA, 2000). Different authors describe the significance of organizational change in different way, but it's an accepted fact that organizational change is important for sustainable business and long term success.

Accepting the greatness of organizational change and knowing the fact that practical steps are needed to make things happen, the next question may arise in minds that “who will take initiative to bring these changes for organizations, to take practical steps” and “who will be the person in charge”. Scholars and researchers also agree on the point that role of a leadership/leader is very important while managing organizations or addressing the issue of organizational change. Kennedy believes that role of the leadership is a key while addressing the issue of organizational change and effective leader can bring effective change for an organization (Kennedy 2000). In their book *Organizational Change*, Senior and Fleming discuss the role of leadership and claim

that leader is a change agent who can take initiative and bring change for organization (Senior and Fleming 2006).

Knowing the importance and implication of strategic leadership and admitting the fact that organizational change is the demand of a time, for sustainable success and strategic leader/leadership can play a key role in bringing and implementing these changes, by deciding the desired form of an organization and taking the practical steps which are needed for the process. The next obvious question which one can have, that what kind of leadership is needed for successful organizational change?

### Research Importance

Coming to the stage where we believe that not only the leadership but the competent leadership is required to understand, formulate and implement the most suitable change for organizations, the next manifest is , what kind of knowledge, skills, talent and competencies are required from a leader to bring a successful organizational change. It is also important to know, what is the relation of successful organizational change to the leadership competencies? And this area will be the focus of our thesis.

While discussing the strategic leadership competencies authors admit that organizational change is a process in which a most desirable and suitable future form of an organization is perceived and route map is decided to get this new shape. Therefore a visionary leadership with innovative approach is a key to make this change happen successfully (Gesell, 2010). According to Bennis, vision is a mental image of a desirable future, so it is important that this future is perceived accurately, which needs a visionary leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 2005). Scholars also highlight that the innovative approach of a leader can increase the chances of success for a leader to get his vision (Bass 2000). Under the light of scientific articles and journals it can be seen that vision and innovative approach are two of those important characteristics of leadership which can make h/her more effective to address the issue of environmental challenges.

The role of strategic leadership is well investigated on the basis of its competences and characteristics to address different organizational issue. Many leadership theories and leadership styles are presented by the scholars to handle and manage different organizational situations.

Defining and discussing different characteristics of leadership authors also mention that some of these characteristics are more important, which a leadership should have to address the phenomena of organizational change successfully, but the relationship between these leadership characteristics and successful organizational change is not much investigated.

Sensing the gap, we take an initiative to investigate the role of strategic leadership on the basis of h/her two characteristics which are “Vision” and “Innovative Approach” and to explore relationship between leadership and the successful organizational change by taking these two characteristics as variables.

## Literature Review

Leadership and its role are the most concerning issue for the business and organizations now days. The “Leaders are individuals who establish direction for a working group of individuals and who gain commitment from this group of members to established direction and who then motivate members to achieve the direction’s outcomes” (Conger, 1992, p18). The term leadership can be viewed through multiple angles and concepts. Traditionally leadership is a set of feature owned by the leader or it is a social phenomenon that comes from relationship with groups.

These concepts can give different opinions about the definition of leadership. It is a continuous debate that whether the leadership comes from the personal qualities of a leader or a Leader makes followership through what s/he does or believes (Grint 2004). Grint also highlight position problems with the leadership, which explores, is the leader a person in charge? With the true authority to decide or implement, or it is only a person in front who takes h/her directions for someone. Recent reviews take leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2004). Another view about leadership is that “leadership is like the Abominable Snowman, whose footprints are everywhere but who is nowhere to be seen” (Bennis and Nanus 1985).

In short leadership/leader is either a person who is in charge and has authorities to take decision and also ahs powers to implement his/her decisions or a process having a set of other authoritative process about organizational, personal or social process of influence for which the groups, teams or organizations can do more to increase their ability. The selection of the leader

not only depends on the personal characteristics of personal but also on the social and cultural factors along with h/her exposure towards life (Bolden 2010).

Organizational leadership is not a magic that one person have and other don't have. It is also not all about the ordered by boss and then observed by him that how much these ordered are obeyed. The leadership of an organization is instead, an ability of management to get and protect the company benefits by realizing employees need and company targets and bringing them together to work in a better environment to achieve the common goals (Sansom 1998). Organizational leadership has a central role in evolution and cultivating an organization. It can help the member of an organization and working teams to face the challenges and to work for organizational goal in a worthy way.

Dunphy and Stace describe an organization leadership as a person who can promote change in an organization by its vision and strategy (Dunphy and Stace 1994 in Senior and Fleming 2006). In this era of rapidly changing business trends and increased customer demands, the role of leadership is more crucial now a days. The strategic leadership is eagerly needed for organizations, which is well capable to predict the essential alterations and changes, in advance and create required commitment and highly suitable atmosphere for worker and teams to understand and adopt these changes successfully. This action by leaders is decisive not only for the effectiveness of the organization but also for its very survival (Bass, 1990; Burke & Cooper, 2004). As the business goals can't be achieved without adopting any strategic business process, likewise the organizational success and sustainability also can't be accomplished without a strategic role of leaders. From allocation of resources to alignment, from perception of thing to decide future focusing, form commitment and motivating the teams to get the goals of an organization, to confirm the sustainable growth, it's a leadership whose footprints are everywhere (McGuire, 2003).

Leader/Leadership is about leading the organizations and organizational teams to go somewhere. If the leaders and its people don't know where to go, then leadership means nothing. So it is important for leaders to have a clear vision. If we try to put the light on word vision, it may have different pictures and angels.

According to Bennis and Nanus “vision is a mental image of a possible and desirable future of the organization” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, in Lyerly, Maxey 2000, P 48) This mental image grows inside the mind of leaders and depends on the h/her competency to perceive the things accurately and use them intelligently for the betterment and sustainability of an organization. Bennis also describes that there are some practically proven leadership competencies that can affect the performance of an organization, which also includes “vision and goal setting”, “interpersonal skills and self knowledge” along with some special characteristics which may be concerned with any specific businesses.

Kotter states that the vision is the ability of a leader to look in to future while aligning the team with that vision, and then make them inspire to get the desired goals concerning that future:

“Vision is a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future” (Kotter, 1996, p 68)

Organizations are based on teams, and dedicated team work is required to make things happen. These people and teams need a clear picture of a future that motivate and inspire them to become an efficient part of an effort for getting that desired future. It is also important in the way that what the reason of their work and decisions is? It is the vision of a leader that makes it assure that actions and the decisions of organizational team are fit into the actual picture of desired future (Kotter, 1996) Kotter also discuss that without the vision of leaders the motivation level of organization people may go down and their activities become meaningless which can prove worst for an organizations at the later end. He further said that

“Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people. Without an appropriate vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible and time consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or nowhere at all” (Kotter 1996, p7)

Though Bennis and Kotter, try to highlight the term “Vision” with different angles and describe it in different ways, but it can be easily understood from their claims, that vision is a ability of a leader to predict and perceive future, in a precise and accurate way along with defining the route map that how to get into this future successfully.

While summarizing the debate on leaders vision, a question can arise into minds “it there any leader without vision” the answer is no. Like every human being every leader must has some vision, but vision of two leaders could be different even while managing the same organization or same matter, because the vision is a perception of unseen things. Two leaders may perceive differently. Moreover as we can't say that this leader is innovative or this is not, before we can see h/her action, decisions, steps taken and their results, for a certain matter. Likewise we can't say that this leader is visionary or this is not before seeing the results of his perceptions.

### Methodology

The paper is primarily qualitative. The research is a based on secondary data. A wide range of literature in the form of academic articles in electronic data bases about change management and innovation has been reviewed broadly. Those searches helped in identifying the links between the leadership qualities and organizational change, which further helped in refining and narrowing down the topic and research question. Content analysis approach by counting the number of times that, any particular leadership property was linked to organizational change and innovation, accepting the fact that innovation and successful organizational are closely related things (Schunpeter, 1971) was employed.

### Analysis

Not long ago, businesses were based on strategies, and the strategies were made by taking the current and known factor into an account. The focus of the leaders was then towards creating and providing the resources to an organization, so it may run smoothly in present circumstances. The game is changed now, in today's business, where the trends, technologies and circumstances are changing rapidly; the success of an organization depends on the better preparation for future, and the most difficult part in this scenario is to decide for future. The future which is unseen and you don't know about (Hage, 1980). Leaders know and understand the need of change for organizations to survive, change in terms of products, services, work process and business model or any other form, for the betterment and development of an organization.

But the matter is? Understanding the need of change is not sufficient for managers or leaders. They need to perceive, understand and then suggest the most suitable and desirable form of

change. It demands the leaders, to use their competencies, including the power of their vision and then getting the path of successful change implementing by their innovative approach (Bennis 1985). The other angle which we explored the terms “leadership” and “change” is why the organizations go for change. What are the driving forces for change or what is the motivation behind the organizational change? Changes for only change are not acceptable, rather than it has some motivation or driving forces for taking the initiative of organizational change. Exploring the motivation or driving forces for organizational change is not the topic of this paper.

Of course these may be the good reasons and motivations for taking the initiative of organizational change. But the changes which are made without taking the future aspects, trends and concerns into an account may not get the long term success and prove temporary. These changes may not able to track organizations on the path of sustainable success and innovations (Pagon and Bautai, 2008).

This paper does not claim that the leadership with, only having the qualities of vision and innovative thinking can make successful environmental challenges. There are other important characteristics of leadership which can play an important role, while addressing the issue of environmental challenges. It is also true that besides the role of strategic leadership there are also other internal and external factors, like the nature of an organization and its culture, environment, both inside and outside an organization, political, technological and global factor, are also there, which matter a lot. Moreover the margin of unpredictable risk is always been there along with all above described factors, which affect the process of organizational change.

While acknowledging and understanding the above mentioned factors, we still believe that strategic leadership with innovative approach can prove very helpful and effective while addressing the issue of organizational change and the changes made by such leadership have greater chances to get the level of successful organizational change.

As we see in the chapter of theoretical framework, most of the authors are agreed that the visionary and innovative leaders may have a greater ability to conclude the process of organizational change with success. And it is because of their accurate perception of future trends, and their unique or new way of managing, thinking and acting. We can also see from the



chapter of case studies that how visionary persons come into scene and take their companies towards breakthrough success by their innovative approach and decisions.

### Summary

Globalization has not only converted the world into a small village but also has a great affect on the mindsets of the people. It is the age of rapidly changing business trends, technologies and business environments. Technology maturity makes the customer aware and well informed to the advancements which are made all around the world, in terms of products, services and procedures.

The demand and the expectations of consumers are not only very high towards companies but also changeful. So is better for companies to not only meet the current demands of consumers, but also perceive the future trends and to make them prepare well before time. For the purpose the companies and organizations need to adopt and implement the change in their business model. Strategic leadership is referred to the intentional effort of a leader who takes an initiative to take the h/her organization towards betterment.

Strategic leadership can make an organization capable to better respond the future trends, technological changes, social and economical changes, and can also provide a competitor edge in this age of high competitions. Change can also improve the performance of an organization which at the later end may lead organizations towards a long term success and sustainability.

While talking about Strategic leadership and its role are the most concerning issue in managing organizations and organizational change. It is accepted by scholars that Strategic leadership has a central role in evolution and cultivating an organization. It can help the member of an organization and working teams to face the challenges and to work for organizational goal in a worthy way. The role of a leader is also very prominent while addressing the change issue for organizations.

Strategic leadership is very demanding and challenging. The strategic leadership is eagerly needed for organizations, which is well capable to predict the essential alterations and changes, in advance and create required commitment and highly suitable atmosphere for worker and teams to understand and adopt these changes successfully.

The leader is a person, anyways, who can have different competencies, capabilities and characteristics. Different scholars present different theories and discuss the characteristics of leadership. They also point out some capabilities of a leader which can make him more effective in managing the organizations. Different leadership styles are also presented by the researchers which a leader can adopt to become more effective in managing organizations and the process of organizational change.

As we know that the Strategic leadership is a challenging process and the successful changes are those which are made by taking future trends into an account. To conclude the process of organizational change with success, some characteristics of a leader are relatively more important. Organizational change means that leader is leading the organizations and organizational teams to go somewhere. If the leaders and its people don't know where to go, then leadership means nothing and h/she may not get the target of successful organizational change. So it is important for leaders to have a clear vision.

Vision of a leader is one of those several characteristics, which a leader can have to initiate and implement successful organizational change. Vision is an ability of a leader to perceive future and future trends in accurate way. Vision of a leader can also prove helpful to motivate the teams and employees within an organization.

The other important characteristic which a leader can have, regarding to the matter of organizational change, is an innovative approach of a leader. The innovative approach of leaders may lead a company towards a sustainable success and can better formulate the organizational strategy for desirable future for organization.

The innovative approach of a leader can be defined as an ability of a leader to think, decide and act in a new or unique way. This approach of a leader can also promote and cultivate the innovative culture within organizations by motivating other to bring new ideas and provide proper infrastructure to convert these ideas into reality.

By acknowledging the importance of vision and innovative approach as competencies of leadership it is also true that there are other important characteristics of leadership which has an effect on the effectiveness of leaders while managing organizations and organizational change. Moreover it is also a fact that role of leader is not a single important factor while addressing the

process of organizational change. There are several other factors which are important and have an ability to affect the process of organizational change and its results.

Accepting the all limitations it is still believed that leadership has an important role in managing organizations and organizational change and a capable leader along with the characteristics of vision and innovative can make can prove more effective in managing organizations and organizational change process.

### Conclusion

As we discussed in above chapters, environmental challenges is not only important but also is a demand of time, and strategic leadership can play a key role in it. The paper may contribute to better understand the role of leadership, h/her competencies and capabilities, while addressing the issue of organizational change. The paper may also inspire the companies and organizations to think about the qualities of “Vision” and “Innovative Approach” in a leader, which may lead organizations to better manage the process of organizational change and may increase the chances of their success. Different scholars have different views over the matters. If we go with the theory that leader can be produced, then it will be the interesting area for researchers that how to produce visionary leaders, who may not only have the great analytical skills for current situations but also have a great ability to perceive the desirable future for organizations.

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