



EMPLOYEE AND STUDENT INSPIRATION, MOTIVATION, AND MENTORSHIP IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This article examines some avenues through which employees and students may be inspired, motivated, and mentored by leaders in Christian higher education institutions. Leaders who exhibit behaviors that align with transformational leadership and servant leadership characteristics are generally found to have a positive relationship with their employees. In the context of faith-based or Christian higher education institutions, the leader-employee relationship may be characterized by faith practices that are not often featured in the traditional research literature. Prayer and integrating biblical principles in teaching and learning are examples of activities that have been found inspiring and motivating in the leader-employee and leader-student relationships. The outcome could be a rewarding experience for the parties involved. Students may also develop and become more effective leaders in the marketplace.

Keywords: leaders, higher education institution, servant leadership, transformational leadership, inspire, motivate, mentor, relationship

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions play a vital role in nurturing continuous human development in modern civilization, as leaders prepare the younger generation for future leadership roles. When employees or students are encouraged to act like leaders, it can foster a positive organizational culture and stimulate employees to perform effectively on the job (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). In the education institution

context, leaders may occupy positions such as lecturer, facilitator, advisor, or administrator, while those who are led may be students and employees.

It has been noted that contemporary leadership research tends to prioritize vision and purpose over power and position (Gardner et al., 2021; Rammidi, 2024). However, since higher education institutions play a unique role in shaping the future of society, the leaders of such institutions must be seen to leverage their power towards the achievement of the institution's mission and purpose. Moreover, an institution that qualifies itself as "Christian" would be expected to maintain high standards of quality and ethical conduct.

The major themes discussed in this paper include the value of the relationship between institutional leaders, such as lecturers, on one hand, and followers, such as employees and students, on the other hand. This discussion also extends to some avenues through which leaders may inspire, motivate, and mentor employees and students in Christian higher education institutions. The virtues of adopting positive leadership behaviors aligned with servant and transformational leadership, and applying biblical practices, are also examined in this discussion.

LEADER AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP

Leadership is considered essential in nearly all aspects of modern life (Antonakis & Day, 2018). Prior research indicated leadership is essential in politics, healthcare, education, industry, commerce, governmental, non-governmental, and faith-based organizations (Gardner et al., 2020). The nature of the job-related relationship between leaders and employees is significant for the institution. Thus, leadership appears to be a complex aspect of human endeavor and often creates curiosity, driving empirical research efforts exploring the leader-employee relationship (Browaays & Price, 2019; Gardner et al., 2020).

However, some empirical research studies have helped increase the understanding of leadership development and leader-employee relations in the workplace (Day et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2020). When leaders accept their role with enthusiasm while working with appropriate knowledge and skills, they are often able to move their employees and the entire organization beyond the ordinary to achieve extraordinary outcomes (Kouzes & Posner, 2018).

Such research outcomes align with biblical instruction. For example, employers and supervisors (leaders) and employees are encouraged to show mutual respect to each other. Furthermore, the job relationship is expected to be characterized by honesty, enthusiasm, and diligence (Eph. 6:5-9). This form of work ethic is significant in interpersonal relations on the job and is repeated in Colossians 3:22 – 4:1.

Current global crises pose multi-dimensional leadership challenges in all spheres of life, including educational institutions. Hence, multi-faceted and effective interventions are required to manage these issues in critical sectors of public life such as education, healthcare, financial services, and community development (Koehrsen & Heuser, 2019). Education leaders need to continuously explore innovative and creative approaches, including e-learning, to deliver for the benefit of students and other stakeholders without sacrificing quality in teaching and learning (Matete et al., 2023; McCowan et al., 2022). Such innovative approaches may also be adopted in mentoring employees to improve

their teaching delivery. In Christian higher education institutions, leaders must be able to inspire and motivate employees and students to become worthy leaders in their spheres of influence.

In transformational leadership theory, the four main dimensions are (a) idealized influence, which is sometimes labeled as charismatic leadership; (b) inspirational motivation or leadership; (c) intellectual stimulation; and (d) individualized consideration (Bass & Bass, 2008; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders can inspire, motivate, and move their constituents to achieve extraordinary outcomes. In the process, the leaders themselves become more effective (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Transformational leaders positively affect the development and transformation of their employees (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This impact often results in improved employee performance or effectiveness, which may lead to improved organizational performance beyond expectations (Buil et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2020; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Leaders can positively develop and transform their employees through workplace relationships that facilitate an inspiring, motivating, and mentorship environment.

In transformational leadership, interactions between leaders and employees involve social and ethical choices and actions (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). In servant leadership, the leader-employee relationship serves as a cornerstone for desired change and growth (Spears, 2018). Thus, leaders in Christian education institutions are expected to demonstrate more meaningful relationships in the job environment, irrespective of the leader's preferred style of leadership (Coley, 2024).

It is noteworthy that long before the modern leadership theories began to see the light of day, the blueprint for servant leadership had already been established by our Lord Jesus. He declared, "Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26–28, NLT). Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated effective transformational leadership when he selected, trained, and empowered ordinary fishermen to become fearless, articulate, and visionary leaders whose legacy has endured till today.

THE VALUE OF LEADERSHIP

Bennis compared leadership metaphorically to beauty because it is easily recognizable but cannot be easily defined (Bennis, 2009). The leadership field has attracted a large volume of research data (Day et al., 2021). Moreover, knowledge about leadership is continuously evolving, with new dimensions, concepts, and study methods being introduced regularly (Day et al., 2021). While leadership practice has changed over time, digital technology tools have also changed the avenues and research methods for studying it (Banks et al., 2019). Thus, leading researchers and analysts acknowledge that a clear, widely accepted definition of leadership is not available. A definition of leadership must consider such attributes as the influence process, the leader's personality and disposition, and the context within which it operates (Day et al., 2021). However, leadership has been described as a formal or informal process in which a leader influences employees in a group or institution, toward the achievement of goals within a specific context (Day et al., 2021).

In addition to transformational, servant, and situational leadership, some other practical leadership concepts have been found effective in organizations. A few of the notable leadership concepts that Christian education institution leaders may practice are summarized here.

The Effective Executive

Leadership effectiveness is essential in any organization. Drucker (2018) outlined ways in which an organizational executive or leader can perform effectively. From empirical research and experience, he demonstrated how people from diverse backgrounds and cultures have worked as effective leaders. All of them excelled in their organizational roles by adopting and implementing a set of eight practices summarized as: acquiring relevant knowledge of the right decisions and actions to be taken; identifying the best way forward for the organization or the group; developing an action plan by preparing a clear road-map of actions to be taken; taking responsibility for decisions; taking responsibility for communicating; focusing on opportunities, not problems; making optimum use of time; and using inclusive language to foster a team spirit (Drucker, 2018).

These action steps outlined by Drucker (2018) are all compatible with a Christian leadership lifestyle. Consequently, Drucker's (2018) guidelines may be adopted by leaders in the education sector to help improve their leadership effectiveness with students and employees.

Authentic Leadership Complement in Education

The concept of authentic leadership can also be adopted by leaders in educational institutions for enhanced job performance. Authentic leaders are described as people who are true to themselves and their convictions and express themselves freely and sincerely (George & Clayton, 2022). They carefully consider the best options in any situation and implement them without allowing other people's expectations to stop them (George & Clayton, 2022). Students, trainee teachers, and education sector employees may enjoy a more fulfilling mentorship experience when they know their lecturers are authentic and trustworthy (Shteigman et al., 2022). The five dimensions of authentic leadership may be summarized as: pursue your purpose with passion; practice solid values; lead with heart as you demonstrate commitment to your job and working cheerfully; establish connected relationships; and demonstrate self-discipline (George & Clayton, 2022).

The Five Fundamental Practices

The *Five Fundamental Practices* is another empirically proven concept that education leaders may adopt. Kouzes and Posner (2018) established this concept, which enables leaders to achieve extraordinary results. These five practices, all stated in the form of compelling action steps, can empower education institution leaders to inspire, motivate, and mentor their employees and students. In summary, the five practices are: (a) set a credible example, (b) create an exciting vision, (c) challenge the

existing process, (d) empower team members, and (e) encourage team members to work well. When team members are encouraged, they feel motivated to persist and not give up easily (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). These recommendations are compatible with the attributes of both servant and transformational leadership styles. Educational institution leaders may actively follow the recommendations of Kouzes and Posner (2018) to inspire, motivate, and mentor their staff and students to engage in innovative research.

This discussion demonstrates a fraction of the wide spectrum of leadership theories, concepts, and practices that higher education leaders may successfully adopt to complement their leadership style. This discussion also highlights the multi-dimensional nature of leadership in the context of organizations. However, none of them explicitly incorporates a spiritual or biblical dimension. Hence, Bell (2010) and Coley's (2024) proposal of a Christian leadership paradigm may be timely.

Leadership Models Applicable in Education

A new model of transformational leadership development that emphasizes the relational theology of leadership was proposed by Bell (2010). Drawing from the example of Jesus, who referred to His disciples and mentees as friends, Bell (2010) challenged education and non-profit leaders to prioritize horizontal relationships with constituents. Thus, a healthy friendship may be another desirable ingredient that can characterize the leader-employee and leader-student relationships.

This proposal for a transformational leadership development with a biblical orientation resonates with Coley's (2024) concept of the *Christlike leadership competency model*. Coley (2024) argued that most of the current breed of popular leadership theories in academic literature "capture only one feature of Christlike leadership" (p. 5), without specifying what that feature is. Furthermore, many biblical leaders exhibited leadership styles, traits, and behaviors that are not captured by contemporary leadership models. Notable examples are obedience to God and faith in the promises of God. However, since Christians have a moral duty to follow the example of positive biblical role models, it may be worthwhile to adopt the Christlike leadership competency model (Coley, 2024).

The proposal for adoption of the Christlike leadership competency model is backed by an analysis of the unique leadership language in the communication of notable Christian authors and leaders. Examples of such expressions are evangelism, faith, forgiveness, grace, obedience, and prayer, among many others (Coley, 2024). One illustration is the need for faith to overcome difficult challenges. Jesus taught that certain seemingly physical challenges or bottlenecks may have spiritual roots, and such situations require faith and prayer to overcome them (Matt. 17:20). In addition, the virtue of forgiveness is essential for realizing emotional healing in many broken interpersonal relationships (James 5:16).

In the current dispensation of globalization, rapid technological advances, global climate change, and healthcare concerns, education sector leaders face an increasingly complex challenge of how to keep pace with innovative communication channels for teaching and learning. Skills and competencies that can empower leaders and make them more effective must be continuously acquired to meet the expectations of the

current generation of employees and students (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). This is essential because the preferences and choices of a previous generation of workers may not necessarily be the same for the present generation. Therefore, how leaders managed the teaching and learning environment in the past must be reviewed, considering the lifestyle of the present generation of employees and students (Banks et al., 2019; Kouzes & Posner, 2018). In addition, a Christian or biblically based response to these complex challenges is necessary.

A Christian Perspective of Transformational Leadership

As noted previously, considerable research effort has been devoted to exploring the impact of transformational leadership theory in organizations. Part of this effort has been directed at investigating how leaders practice transformational leadership in higher education institutions. It has been argued that the original concept of the transforming leader is closely associated with a biblical orientation (Scarborough, 2010). In his attempt to highlight the Christian dimension of this theme, Scarborough (2010) proposed and defined Christian transformational leadership as follows:

Christian transformational leadership is leadership that declares a biblical or Christian foundation or is specifically directed to the Church. It holds that a leader's vision, character, persuasiveness, and ability to strategize guarantee that he or she will be influential (or transformational) to achieve shared goals. (Scarborough, 2010, p. 77)

This definition implies that Christian transformational leadership has two dimensions: a biblical or Christian foundation and service to the Church (which may be demonstrated through a faith-based institution). This concept adds some value to the leadership discourse. However, this author views Scarborough's (2010) definition as being restrictive. A Christian dimension to transformational leadership should be applicable in all organizations where leaders are at liberty to practice their Christian faith. In an increasingly secularized culture, there might be some challenges in situations where the organization explicitly forbids faith-based practices. In such instances, it may be prudent for leaders to exercise discernment and discretion.

CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES AND LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE

A cursory review of current leadership theories in comparison with biblical texts is bound to reveal significant similarities. A classic illustration is Jesus as a servant leader who washed the feet of His disciples, followed by His admonishing that His disciples should do likewise (John 13:5–17). A second example relates to ethical leadership and honest stewardship, which are emphasized in Luke 16:10–12. Here, our Lord Jesus taught that honesty and responsible stewardship are required of His followers.

Transformational, servant, and ethical leadership, all being change-oriented leadership theories, have been described as effective approaches to problem-solving in contemporary times (Day et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2020). In addition,

transformational leadership has been proposed to be very effective in organizations when given appropriate religious contexts (Rammidi, 2024).

Admittedly, most Christian institutions, including those in the higher education sector, are facing critical challenges in recent times. These threats appear from multiple sources and philosophies, such as a secular and hostile culture, rising cost of education delivery, dilemmas with balancing faith and academic integrity, the gay movement, and several others (Norheim, 2023). In response to these challenges, servant leadership has been encouraged as an ideal style of leadership for the Christian community (Coggins & Bocarnea, 2015). Servant leadership was demonstrated by our Lord Jesus, and he made it an imperative for all His followers (Groeschel, 2018). The call for leaders in educational institutions to inculcate biblical virtues in their line of duty is very appropriate. Christian principles are taught and practiced in the hope of bringing attitudinal transformation to individuals and the wider society (Coggins & Bocarnea, 2015). There is no better context to demonstrate this than in Christian higher education institutions.

Biblical virtues have a universal appeal and may be essential in both interpersonal and business relationships. It has been observed that *agape* love is the foundation virtue from which all other virtues emanate and is the primary source of virtuous leadership (Bocarnea et al., 2018). *Agape* is the Greek expression for God's unconditional love for mankind. Indeed, *agape* love, a multi-dimensional virtue, contributes positively to inspiring and motivating employees towards attaining increased productivity (Angeles, 2024). There is significant biblical support for this virtue.

Our Lord Jesus emphasized the value of *agape* love when He taught that the most important commandment is to love the Lord God wholeheartedly. The second commandment, equally important, is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). Furthermore, the practical nature of *agape* love has been beautifully expressed by the apostle Paul in the famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. *Agape* love is a vital foundation for ethical and uplifting interpersonal relationships in various contexts, including business, family, and education (Winston, 2024). When individuals practice behaviors associated with *agape* love, their constituents feel inspired, motivated, and energized to offer their utmost. They also realize emotional healing, feel a sense of belonging, and appreciate their self-worth (Winston, 2024).

Inspiring and Motivating Students

It would be helpful for leaders involved mostly in human-centered sectors, including education, to adopt a personal philosophy that can make them deliver the desired impact. Spears (2024) suggests leaders may adopt servant leadership as a personal guiding philosophy to inspire and motivate other people. In that sense, it would not just be another style of behavior that the leader may decide to wear or put off, as if it were a piece of garment worn to match prevailing weather conditions (Spears, 2024). This tallies with the biblical injunction for believers to put on the spiritually renewed nature that produces virtuous fruit (Colossians 3:10).

Leaders can also inspire their students and staff by exhibiting the virtue of humility, a characteristic of servant leadership (Bryant, 2024; Lencioni, 2018). Individuals who find themselves in an advantaged position over other people in their

institutions, such as pastoral leaders, may be prone to narcissistic tendencies (Bryant, 2024). This propensity may equally apply to higher education leaders who interact with students or junior employees. A much better and more productive relationship between leaders and learners may be realized when leaders consciously demonstrate humility. This was one of the several desirable role-model qualities identified in the distinguished career of personalities such as Frances Hesselbein, a former CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA, and Dr. Dallas Willard, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary (Baron, 2018; Dittmar, 2018).

The practice of inspiring people is common to both transformational and servant leadership theories. Illustrating with some truly inspiring examples from the military, Foley (2018) notes that servant leaders inspire their people to grow, and at the same time develop their unique skills and competencies. This may be true in the higher education sector as well. As teachers and professors develop mutually dependent relationships with students, the latter may be drawing inspiration from their leaders, consciously or unconsciously.

Academic Advising

In many higher education institutions, the function of academic advising is a critical aspect of student enrollment and academic choices. This is another significant area where the institution's leaders can help prospective students in their quest to select the most satisfying institution and program (McClellan, 2024). Academic advisors appear to hold the key to the future of prospective students as they navigate the process of new admissions. In many cases, they may also serve as trusted guides throughout the academic journey of higher education students. Advisors can, therefore, explore avenues by which their relationship with students may be mutually beneficial. A servant leadership model has been suggested by McClellan (2024) for this purpose.

Academic advising has been described as a teaching function characterized by unique outcomes, processes, and pedagogical approaches based on the context in which it takes place (McClellan, 2024). Academic advisors thus have a unique opportunity to contribute towards a potentially bright future for the students they manage. This opportunity might pose its own equivalent challenges. However, the advisor can maximize positive outcomes from the advisor-student relationship by practicing servant leadership (McClellan, 2024) or the appropriate dimensions of transformational leadership. A servant leader approach, in such instances, may be characterized by a relationship in which the student is inspired and motivated by the advisor. One productive servant leadership behavior with universal appeal in this direction is showing compassion to other people, as advocated by Groeschel (2018). The New Testament narrative demonstrates how Jesus frequently responded to human need immediately as He was moved by compassion (e.g., Mark 1:41, 6:34; Luke 7:13).

MENTORING THROUGH PROACTIVE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Leaders practicing either transformational or servant leadership at the workplace can mentor employees to improve their interpersonal relations. Epitropaki et al. (2020) pointed out certain human factors that characterized the leader-employee relationship at

the workplace, such as interpersonal discord and transgressions or infractions. Such incidents often have implications on organizational outcomes transcending ordinary personal relationships (Epitropaki et al., 2020). In the event of such issues arising in the organizational context, appropriate steps must be taken to address and resolve them, including apology and forgiveness (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). Transgressions or infractions cannot be ignored easily because an elevated level of interdependence prevails in the relationship between a leader and an employee (Kim et al., 2020). An employee frequently depends on a leader for resources such as information, finances, organizational affiliation, and status. The leader also depends on the employee for such resources as service and performance (Bellamy, 2021).

These relationship factors can have far-reaching implications on how apology and forgiveness issues are managed in institutions. When supervisors or employees offend one another, the supervisor-employee relationship may be adversely affected, which may further generate implications for organizational outcomes, such as poor or reduced output (Epitropaki et al., 2020). In such situations, it may be necessary for appropriate strategies to be adopted to repair the damage and restore the relationship to levels that assure the same or enhanced performance (Dean, 2020; Epitropaki et al., 2020). In addition, employees look up to their leaders to engage them in an ethical and uplifting manner (Henson, 2020). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) emphasized the importance of leaders serving as worthy role models. When employees or team members testify about the benefits they obtained from their leaders, it can encourage and inspire leaders to continue developing the potential of each member of their team (Huizinga & Dean, 2020). The mentorship activities often come with challenges, a few of which are discussed below.

Challenges with Mentoring

The mentoring role comes with both success stories and challenges. Some challenges identified with mentorship in a study of preservice teachers were inadequate professional preparation of the mentor to assume this role; inability to set aside sufficient time for mentoring; poor attention to developing a high-quality mentor-mentee relationship (Jita & Munje, 2022). In addition, Nuis et al. (2023) identified another challenge as a lack of psycho-social support for the mentee by the mentor. In this context, the main components of psycho-social support were trust, empathy, similarity, and availability (Nuis et al., 2023).

Leaders as Role Models

Role modeling is another virtue of leadership that facilitates mentorship. Leaders must serve as role models (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) and, in the workplace relationship, employees or team members can best testify about the benefits obtained from their leaders. Similarly, leaders in managerial positions must serve as role models and relate to all people, especially their employees, in an ethical and uplifting manner (Peltz & Wilson, 2020).

Leaders in higher education institutions bear a huge responsibility to serve as role models who take advantage of their positions to inspire, motivate, and mentor the

next generation of leaders. Leaders can do so by literally and metaphorically serving their employees and students (Miller, 2018). The conduct of education institution leaders must also inspire creative and innovative thinking (Hughes et al., 2018). This could have implications for how leaders inspire, motivate, and mentor their employees as they groom them to take up leadership positions.

Lecturers and staff in higher education institutions can take advantage of their positions and responsibilities to inspire, motivate, and mentor their students as well as employees. In this context, higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping the appropriate socio-cultural responses (Biney et al., 2021). Considering cultural factors implies that these institutions need to maintain the best international practices to promote the practice of teaching and learning.

Middle-level management staff may be inspired and motivated through transformative learning. Applying this approach, the lecturer in a tertiary institution must be willing to foster organizational commitment (Donkor et al., 2018). Another strategy would be to adopt improved methods of teaching and learning (McCowan et al., 2022). Lecturers and administrative staff in higher education institutions must submit themselves to more experienced staff, even if they have retired from active service, to enable them to tap into the vast experience of their predecessors (McCowan et al., 2022). Such initiatives will inspire, motivate, and mentor current institutional leaders and avoid a tendency to adopt poor methods of teaching and learning. A potential vicious cycle of passing on poor mentorship behaviors must be broken so that a younger generation of lecturers will adopt more innovative and effective pedagogical approaches.

Coaching is another practical avenue by which education leaders may inspire, motivate, and mentor their students and employees. The common imagery evoked by the concept of coaching is the sports arena where a coach interacts with players. However, as noted by Roark and Abelsky (2024), coaching in the business arena is a highly effective process for developing the latent potential of the younger generation. It is believed that Jesus must have been coached in the carpentry profession by his father, Joseph. The doubting citizens of Nazareth described him as a carpenter, as they expressed amazement at the profound teachings of Jesus (Mark 6:3). The twelve disciples and other followers of Jesus were similarly coached in many ways, including evangelistic outreach (Luke 10:1). In a similar vein, it would not be out of place for leaders in Christian higher education institutions to employ coaching principles to achieve desired positive outcomes from their relationship with students and junior employees. Some professional coaching that may be utilized includes executive coaching, leadership development coaching, team effectiveness, personal coaching, and life coaching (Roark & Abelsky, 2024). The ultimate trophy would be leaders watching with profound contentment and joy the maturity of their students who would have become effective leaders in their life endeavors.

SUMMARY

In this paper, the value of effective leadership in Christian higher education was explored. Leaders can inspire, motivate, and mentor students and employees by adopting proven leadership competencies. Christian higher education institutions can

apply biblically based practices such as prayer, faith, and, most importantly, agape love in obedience to God's Word to complement their leadership. In this way, it is expected that these institutions will produce a more lasting impact on their constituents and the entire world.

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