-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

THE CRUX OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP FOR A TRANSFORMED PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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─**Abstract**─

Strategic leadership is widely recognized as a phenomenon aiming to reform the management practices of public institutions, which are multifaceted and saddled with mammoth responsibilities of delivering government strategies in an ever-changing and dynamic socio-economic environment. The prevalent ineffectiveness and poor service delivery in the Nigerian public sectors calls for the induction of leaders who can strategically change the narratives of the public sector performance, and in doing so, bring about an overhaul in the public service delivery system in the country. This study contributes to existing albeit scarce literature on strategic leadership theory and practice in the context of the Nigerian public sector. It examines the features, responsibilities and critical roles of strategic leadership in improving the quality of performance delivered by public institutions. Data is gathered through a desk review using secondary sources such as recent and relevant articles, papers, reports and books. Subsequently, data is analysed thematically. The results indicate that strategic leadership is a dimension of strategic management that has a positive connection with organisational effectiveness. Therefore, the Nigerian public organisations need to pay particular attention to the fundamentals and transformational qualities of strategic leadership to achieve anticipated transformations. More so, the existing leadership channels and energies in the public sector should be redirected for increased efficacy and effectiveness of the public service delivery system.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, public sector, vision, organisational effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The public sectors' effectiveness is indispensable to the development of a country. Governments formulate and implement their plans, programmes and actions through governments' ministries, departments and agencies. Therefore, the public sectors are mediums and machineries through which government actualises its intention to benefit citizens and are institutional instruments of civic/public service delivery (Eliogu-Anenih, 2017; Junaidu Bello Marshall et al., 2015). Generally, the extent of a nation's development is determined by the nature and values of its administrators and leaders (Mukhtar et al., 2017). Likewise, the productivity of organisations is mostly dependent on the quality of their leadership. Leaders are capable of affecting improvements and considered vital in enhancing the productivity of the public sector while delivering their services to the public (Losari et al., 2015).

Globally, the drastic changes taking place in terms of technological advances, COVID-19 pandemic, economic developments and climate change have compelled organisations, including governments, to transform their presiding management practices to a dynamic one. These institutional changes and external pressures are particularly heightened in the context of public organisations, which are functioning against a continuous demand for accountability, effectiveness and improvement despite limited availability of government resources. In response to these demands, attention has shifted to strategic leadership, considered a fundamental ingredient for improving and enhancing the quality of public services. However, the concept of strategic leadership is an elusive one that requires further elaboration (Palladan et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2015). More so, a study of the impediments to the proficiency of the Nigerian public sector practises identifies a number of challenges and setbacks, including political corruption, financial mismanagement, cronyism, incompetence and compromised standards of quality service. These drawbacks are the combined results of institutional corruption and lack of effective leadership in the public sector. Consequently, sectors like the education, power, security, economic and health sector have borne the brunt of mismanagement, stagnating the development and growth of the country's public sector (Adanri et al., 2016; Nwoko, 2019).

In addition, studies have pinned leadership crisis and ineptitude as a major contributing factor to public sector ineffectiveness, which in turn, adversely affects the pace of development in an individual country (Eliogu-Anenih, 2017; Mukhtar et al., 2017). However, there are limited studies on leadership styles in the public sector (Sudha et al., 2016), and there is scanty information on how managerial ineffectiveness can be tackled through strategic leadership practices. This paper focuses on strategic organisational leadership, particularly in the context of public organisations that are focused on formulating and implementing government policies to deliver government's objectives of service delivery. This study illuminates the attributes and roles of strategic leadership with a view to explore its potentials in the management of public organisations. This exploration is geared towards the quest for the delivery of quality services and the

achievement of an effective public sector reform in Nigeria. The next section addresses the concept of strategic leadership, followed by the analysis of prevailing leadership performance in the Nigeria public organisations. Subsequently, the methodology is highlighted, followed by the results and a discussion of the study findings pertaining to the approaches, processes, attributes and roles of strategic leadership. Lastly, the study includes a conclusion of the research outcomes as well as implications and recommendations for future researches.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualising Strategic Leadership

The concept of strategic leadership can be fully understood when it is fragmented into two components i.e., strategy and leadership. Strategy is concerned with success, which comes from setting goals and making quality decisions to achieve those set goals and targets. Strategists are usually developed in the pursuit of value creation i.e., continuous value creation with primary focus and passion for a vision (Onu et al., 2018). The definition connotes that the starting point for a strategist is to create a clear vision. The term leadership however, can be ambiguous if not narrowly defined to the scope of a study. According to Jabbar et al. (2017), leadership plays a vital role in forming and enforcing strategies. Leadership is concerned with identifying realistic courses and techniques of organisations' performance and accomplishments. Leadership is responsible for proposing a course of action, defining and choosing strategies, drawing out plans and managing the operational activities undertook.

Successively, strategic leadership is crucial in defining an organisation's purpose and vision and converting them into an organisation's performance outcomes. Jabbar et al. (2017) buttress that strategic leadership signifies leaders' capacity to anticipate, visualise, sustain flexibility and empower others to create basic strategic transformation. Strategic leadership has the feature of not only managing others but also managing the organisations while adjust with changes in the environment, which are noticeably unavoidable in today's age. Strategic leadership epitomises leaders with skills that strengthen an organisations' level of adaptability to precipitated environmental vicissitudes. Strategic leaders identify the prospects of providing solutions to recurring leadership challenges because strategic leadership encompasses diverse leadership styles such as charismatic, transformational, transactional and others (Gupta, 2018; Meuser et al., 2016). Hence, organisations are appropriately directed and capacitated towards achieving success. Strategic leaders support and champion organisational change directed towards an improved state. Coalitions are built around organisations' employees for a smooth transition to an expected end (Alayoubi et al., 2020).

Kitonga (2017) emphasise that strategic leadership is a necessity for all types of organisations. The study of the relationship between strategic leadership and organisational performance of non-profit organisations recognises a significant and

positive connection between the two constructs. It shows that the application of strategic leadership practices would have a positive effect on the performance of the organisations. This is similar to the findings of Rahman et al. (2018) which show a direct relationship between strategic leadership and the operational performance of the organisation. The empirical study of Corcoran (2017) also underlines that leadership has a positive effect on public sector productivity. Adanri et al. (2016) studies find a statistically substantial connection between leadership style and leadership effectiveness. They accentuate the importance of having an effective and ethical leader in order to improve public service delivery and responsiveness, noting that leadership skill can be learnt through personal development, training and practices. Leadership has become a stern concern in the public sector since its prominence in the new era. The need for strategic leaders is particularly pronounced in the transformation of the public sector as it is perceived that management cannot transform organisations like change agents, that is, strategic leaders. Therefore, beyond the demand for an effective leadership is the demand for visionary leaders who can think of the future, who build partnership and who can inspire an extensive sense of ownership of change and transformation (P Joyce, 2016).

2.2 Analysis of Prevailing Leadership Performance in the Nigeria Public Organisations

Organisational leaders particularly in the public sector are concerned with the process of delivering national developmental objectives that are of interest to political leaders. This explains the significance of public institutions to the national development of the country. Nwoko (2019) posits that national development depicts a nation's capacity to provide basic social amenities such as housing, power, education, water, health, security etc, to improve the social welfare of individual citizens. The Nigerian public service has a tripartite structure that consists of the civil service, agencies and parastatals, designed as the administrative machinery of government needed to execute the policies, objectives and decisions of the government. However, the Nigerian public service is beleaguered with ineffectiveness, corruption, ethical misconducts, and inefficiency despite several reforms at improving the services of the sector (Nwoko, 2019; Ogar et al., 2020).

According to Halilu et al. (2016), the public service performance has not matched expectations. The inefficient and appalling performance of the public service delivery is reported to be a result of its leadership practices. Unfair and unethical practices of absenteeism, unmerited promotion, and fraud etc., are stimulated by unaccountable leaders, thereby, weakening the professional and ethical standards of the sector. The underperformance and underdevelopment of the public sector organisations is not peculiar to Nigeria but a recognised deficiency across many African countries. Yet, government organisations are beckoned as channels through which the continent's resources can be harnessed to influence the socio-economic development of the nations in Africa. This calls for the engagement of strategic leaders to ensure that preparation

meets opportunity, thereby creating a lasting success for the organisation (Paul Joyce, 2015; Lituchy et al., 2017). Nwoko (2019) ruefully notes that the objectives of the Nigerian public service and the development of the country would remain a mirage if the leadership crisis and corruption in the public service is not adequately addressed. Conversely, the empirical study of Halilu et al. (2016) establishes that the performance of the Nigerian public service could be greatly influenced by leaders who value accountability. Mbuba (2018) highlight the ineffectiveness of functional schemes and legislative acts such as the Independence Corrupt Practices and other related offences (ICPC) Act (2000), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Act (2002) because of the endemic corruption in the public sector. This again is traced to the existence of corrupt leadership, which has weakened supposed sanctions and the very fabric of public bureaucracy.

In the last few years, strategic management and strategic planning have been recognised as valuable means of reforming the public service delivery system and public policy-making. Henceforth, it has become imperative for public sector institutions to understand the basics of strategic management as a public manager or skilled civil servant or a politician as they engage directly or indirectly in public management (Paul Joyce, 2015). Recently, public organisations in countries like South Africa, Germany, Sweden, Belgium and Japan have embraced leadership competency models to improve the public sector's effectiveness. As it is, the public sector operates in a highly politicised environment, which makes the leadership role more challenging than the private sector, honing them to become global leaders. Global leaders are expected to be competent intellectually, emotionally, culturally and in character (Mau, 2017). Mukhezakule et al. (2019) alluded to strategic leadership as vital for an organisations' success and to direct a lasting and sustainable course of action for an individual organisation. The authors note that the foundation of strategic planning is vision, mission and objectives, which can be built by strategic leaders through their individual efforts. As noted earlier, the concepts of leadership and management are crucial aspects of study in the field of management. Leadership however is responsible for initiating the first step of creating the vision and strategies as a pioneer and subsequently, the management initiates the plan and steps to implement the strategies (Chatterjee et al., 2018). These recent initiatives are undoubtedly inspired by the developments in the private sector management principles and have placed emphasis on leadership with a view to foster accountability, innovation and goal-oriented strategies. This provides a rationale for the exploration of what strategic leadership entails as well as the leadership competencies required to ensure an improved performance in public organisations.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper has employed qualitative approach to explore diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study. The qualitative approach entails an inquiry process that provides in-depth insights and meaning to a focus of investigation by answering

questions of what and how (Gaete Celis, 2019). Secondary data were sourced from available interpretations of authors' perspectives in strategy documents, books, articles and journals. Extant and relevant literature was sourced from international and national databases such as the European Journal of Business and Management, International Journal of Public Administration and Management Research, Journal of Social Sciences and Public Policy, The Journal of World Investment & Trade, among others. A number of online forums and search engines including Google Scholar, Research Gates, Science Direct, Taylor and Francis were employed using keywords such as strategic management, organisational performance, strategic leadership and public sector.

Significant information was extracted from the secondary data collected using thematic analysis. According to Maguire et al. (2017), thematic analysis is a kind of qualitative analysis method used to provide in-depth knowledge, which is presented in sections of patterns identified as themes. It is considered an appropriate way of systematically presenting the interpretation from data. A theme is used to enhance the meaning and interpretation of a finding, gives the researcher an opportunity to easily understand identified concepts.

The thematic analysis was performed step by step. First, the collected data was arranged according to its relevance to the study. Second, the organized data was coded and recoded and classified into meaningful groups. Third, the most relevant themes were searched and extracted from the classified data. In the fourth step, the themes that had been produced were checked to ensure that they appropriately represented the meanings found in the data set as a whole. Finally, the themes were defined, named and presented in the study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Strategic Leadership Approaches and Processes

According to Alayoubi et al. (2020), strategic leadership approach starts with a plan. A strategic leader should have a strategic plan where a desired outcome is defined and steps to achieve the outcome are specified. Strategic planning involves a detailed, broad-visioned plan with medium term goals. This should not be mistaken for a short-term operational plan. Strategic leaders learn to craft and shape the future by continuously scanning the environment the organisation operates in so that the response to any change in the environment can be analysed. This is so because it is important to constantly evaluate constant initiatives demanded. However, any such evaluation must always be inclined towards a future goal. Strategic planning usually starts with strategic intent, which involves the identification of desired change and the commitments towards achieving it. The planning approach does not imply that the means to operationalize the notions is known. Therefore, strategic intent helps to set targets that delineate the means to achieve a strategic outcome.

It is important to carefully outline the strategic processes, which encompasses how a desired outcome would be achieved. The strategic process underpins the success of strategic envisioning, engagement, communication, execution and monitoring. Strategic process is imperative to transform a strategy from mere documentary analysis to an agenda that guides both present and future exploits. The process helps to observe how a strategic policy develops and changes the organisation's existing status to a preferred state following a strategic thinking. The visionary abilities of a strategic leader help in scanning opportunities for improvement that will benefit the organisation and its stakeholders. Hence, strategic leaders should be focused on the processes that will make a strategy effective (Alayoubi et al., 2020). The significance of realising the engagement and commitment of all employees in the organisation is promoted through strategic communication and conversations. Strategic leaders are successful when the benefits of a desired change are clearly communicated to all, particularly by recognising the voices of inaudible beneficiaries (Alayoubi et al., 2020; P Joyce, 2016). Thus, the public has a sense of owning the reform. Subsequently, strategic conversations will nurture the easy articulation of a strategic plan, which is attainable by a strategic leader. This will help the implementation stage of the strategic process and ensure that the evaluation and feedback loop occur to advance the entire process and overall organisational strategy.

4.2   Attributes of Strategic Leaders

Strategic leaders possess some distinctive capabilities, which makes them resilient to attain sustainability. The critical role strategic leaders play in fostering an effective work environment and initiate positive change while identifying common pitfalls that could hinder the leader's effectiveness. Notable characteristics identified by Gupta (2018) are vision, ability to organise resources, emotional intelligence and passion for results. Adanri et al. (2016) identify interpersonal skills, people management, long-term focus and action-oriented policies among the core personal and organisational competencies of strategic leaders. Mukhezakule et al. (2019) allude to strategic thinking, strategic planning, visionary, team worker and ability to inspire as some of the traits of strategic leadership. According to Du Plessis et al. (2016), strategic leaders should have the capabilities of strategic decision making, communicating the vision, evolving vital skills, developing an organisation's structure, building the next generation of leaders, maintaining a working organisational culture and stressing on ethical practices in the organisations. Chatterjee et al. (2018) buttress that strategic leaders should be faithful, reliable, respectful, innovative and able to learn from mistakes and past experiences. In essence, strategic leadership is more than the ability to occupy a position of power. It calls for the ability to inspire others and requires an intentional disposition to do the right thing in an effective and efficient manner. This leadership style is vital to actualising any attempt at reformation and transformation of the Nigerian public sector in the future.

4.3   Responsibilities of Strategic Leaders

On the basis of the afore-discussed attributes of strategic leaders, the framework below depicts the essential responsibilities of strategic leaders as should be in the context of Nigerian public institutions. Strategic leaders fulfil clearly demarcated responsibilities to achieve positive outcomes such as improved performance, innovation and strategic actions (Samimi et al., 2020).
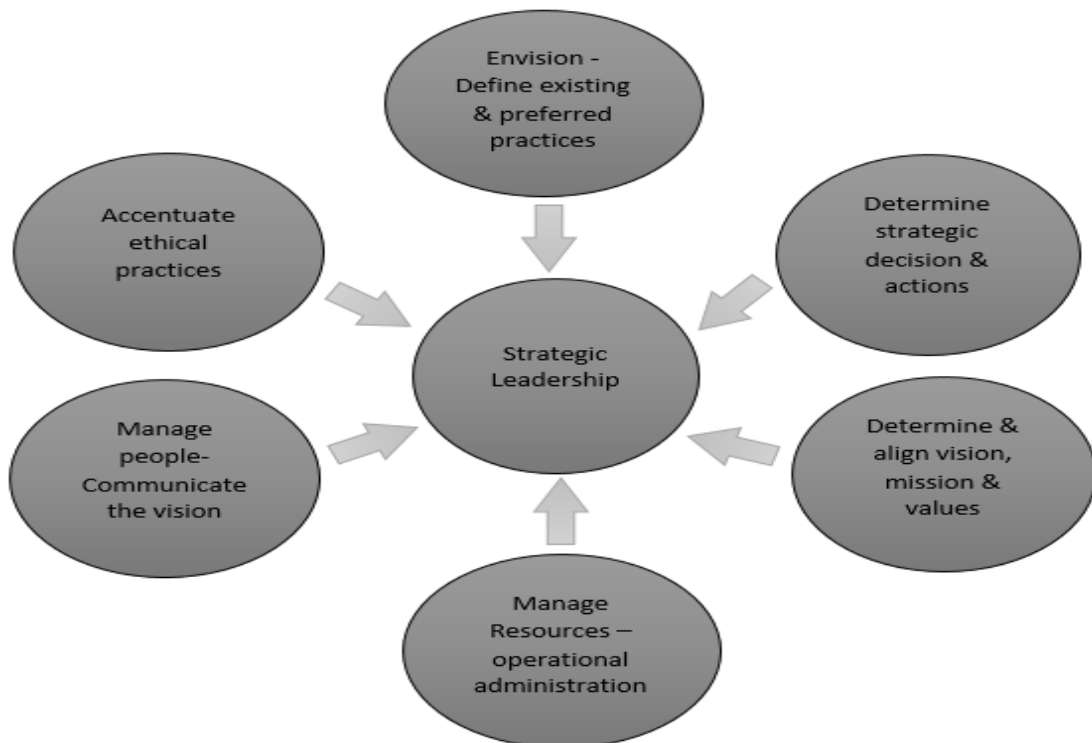

Figure 1: Potentials of Strategic Leadership
Source: Authors' Construct

Figure 1 illustrates the potentials of strategic leadership, which signifies the integrated skills and abilities needed to effectively contribute and perform in different tasks in the public organisation. It also highlights the distinctive and crucial responsibilities of strategic leadership in the context of the Nigerian public sector. Key identified responsibilities of strategic leadership are further explained in the following sections.

Determining Existing Practices and Status – strategic leaders evaluate an existing performance, which informs a desire for, and realisation of, a needed shift. The end is best identified from the beginning because it prompts questions such as, where the organisation stands, where it desired to be and how to get there. In identifying an anticipated destination, it is necessary to identify the existing location to afford a correct compass guide. Onu et al. (2018); Gupta (2018) mention that organisations that review their eminence and ground realities are able to identify their internal competences and

external situations as organisations are often challenged based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. More so, public organisations exist in a complex and dynamic environment that is largely influenced by political conditionalities and considerations. It is essential for public organisations to understand the dynamics within which they operate. Consequently, strategic leaders are able to sense the need for a change in the organisational policies, structures, technologies, and other means to enhance performance and output.

Determining Strategic Decisions and Actions – the exigency of determining existing practices facilitates the need for practical decision-making and agenda-setting in an organisation. In fact, decision-making is central in the strategic management of organisations (Onu et al., 2018). The incessant and limitless demands of the public placed immeasurable pressure on public organisations, compelling them to be more flexible to respond to rapidly changing demands. Leadership influences the decision-making process in terms of the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the decision. Strategic leaders in the public sector should bear in mind that their individual decisions, actions and inactions influence the organisation as well as and the country at large (Samimi et al., 2020). A major undertaking of strategic leaders is developing an action plan to convert strategies into desired deliverables and accomplishments. A strategic leader in the public sector would need to reflect, plan and take action based on the sectors' working abilities (Gupta, 2018). This will help to eradicate elements of redundancy and institutional delays endemic to the present-day public sector in Nigeria.

Directing and Aligning the Vision, Policies and Values – the decisions of a strategic leader should be focused on promoting and fulfilling the organisations' vision, policies and values (Jabbar et al., 2017). The organisation's vision represents the organisation's desired future. The vision, that is a picture of the future, helps in defining the goals and plans necessary to accomplish the objectives and mandate of the organisation. Organisations directed by stipulated vision, actionable policies and values can ensure a significant level of growth and development over time. A thorough understanding of the vision, policies and values by all employees in public organisations will strengthen institutional commitment to establishing a quality check and developing a sense of responsibility to provide better-quality services. Policies represents the rules, guidelines and procedures that guide the collective actions and decisions within the organisation (Onu et al., 2018). These are essential in the work of organisations because they guide actions towards set goals and objectives (Gupta, 2018). The Nigerian public sector would operate successfully when its vision and mission are in harmony with its routine organisational activities. This is so because strategic leaders are able to provide strategic orientation.

Managing the Organisation's Resources and Personnel – the fact that organisations have limited resources cannot be overemphasised (Onu et al., 2018). This stretches the necessity to manage within the available resources. The Nigerian public organisations face charges of corruption because of trending misappropriation of funds and mismanagement of resources despite the awareness that there are scarce resources to be

managed. Gupta (2018) observes that resources include the people or personnel that the strategic leaders are responsible to motivate. These individuals or employees are motivated to nurture their enthusiasm and professional commitment towards attaining desired organisational goals. The presence of a strategic leader in an organisation will impact on the human resource management undertakings such as recruitment, selection, compensation, appraisal, and feedback from both internal and external stakeholders to motivate and monitor performance (Samimi et al., 2020). Strategic leaders in the public institutions have access to privileged information, which should be strategically managed. The management of resources holds strategic leaders responsible for the managerial decisions such that public institutions become accountable for their actions and inactions.

Accentuating Professional and Ethical Practices – professional values should not be compromised on while organisations are performing their responsibilities. Although public servants, and particularly strategic leaders, are vested with political authorities, it should not be abused. More so, the strategic capabilities of personnel would welcome new knowledge to initiate new competencies (Gupta, 2018). The demand for accountable social actors' places key ethical concerns on strategic leaders to make them answerable to inappropriate behaviour (Samimi et al., 2020). The decision of establishing organisation like the Economic Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) is not enough to curb corruption in the public sector. However, the consideration of having strategic leaders at the helm of affairs in each institution would inculcate discipline because the leaders are constantly accountable to the public.

Accordingly, public sectors' effectiveness is guaranteed where strategic leadership is in place. This kind of leadership style will afford the formulation of strategic (long-term) frameworks that can potentially promote the values of responsible leadership, stewardship, accountability, transparency and the need to effectively implement government's policies to support positive results, ensure citizens' satisfaction and facilitate economic development (Drumaux et al., 2018). This is particularly important because leadership from within public institutions translates to leadership on the level of public administration and governance.

5.   CONCLUSION

This paper provided exposition on the relevance of strategic leadership in organisations, especially noting its benefits for public sector organisations that are burdened with meeting the limitless demands of the public against the backdrop of a dynamically evolving world. Strategic leadership is widely acknowledged as an essential factor for an organisation's long-lasting success. An organisation led by strategic leadership or management is more likely to achieve and realise the values of operational efficiency, optimal service delivery, sound decision-making, and outstanding performance. Strategic leadership cannot be detached from strategic management as both represent

elements that ultimately motivate organisational achievements. The potential of strategic leadership practice to ensure organisational change and growth in terms of attaining sustainable and long-term organisational performance cannot be over-emphasised.

6.   RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The prevalent deficiencies identified in the level of effectiveness, efficiency and efficacy of public organisations in the Nigerian public sector creates a performance gap. This gap requires the use of strategic leadership and management style that is valuable for setting an innovative strategy in motion to help ensure the long-term growth and development of public service institutions and offices. This is expected to alter the usual operations of public sector but will ultimately advance the development of the nation. While the current underperformance of the Nigerian public sector necessitates the use of strategic leadership practices, the onus is on the strategic leader to influence the public sector's performance positively. Hence, strategic leadership requires a strong commitment towards improvement, which is necessary if the Nigerian public sector is to survive in a rapidly changing world. Besides, the importance and critical roles of the public institutions indicates the desirable vitality of the presence of not just mere managers or leaders but strategic leaders who would deliver its deliverables with a long-term vision.

7.   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE

RESEARCH

This study highlights the importance of strategic leadership in the context of the dynamic public service sector. However, the study only particularly focuses on strategic leadership from the perspective of the public sector of Nigeria. Future exposition of the study could incorporate the assessment of strategic leadership in other countries. More so, insights into the importance of strategic leadership could be replicated in other sectors as it is worth comparatively studying and analysing the extent to which strategic leadership practices are being utilised in the public and private sectors as well as verifying and substantiating the impact of strategic leadership on the public sector's performance in developing or least developed countries in the global South.

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