MANAGING WORKFORCE DIVERSITY AND THE QUEST FOR ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

IYAMABHOR Martins¹, OGUNDARE, Justice Taiwo², Roland Orie Akpubi¹, & OGBOR John O¹

¹Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management and social Sciences, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

²Department of Marketing, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: IYAMABHOR Martins
Corresponding Author Email: iyamabhor47@gmail.com

Article Received: 02-05-23  Accepted: 26-05-23  Published: 01-06-23

Licensing Details: Author retains the right of this article. The article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 License (http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Journal open access page.

ABSTRACT

This study proposes a framework for analyzing and understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and the management of workforce diversity. Using meta-synthesis as a methodological approach, the study examines the current research stream in workforce and workplace diversity. Second, the concept of ethical leadership is examined, including the conditions for its applicability and possibility in creating leader-follower relationship. It is argued here that our understanding of diversity and all of its ramifications are products of our ethical and cultural conditioning. A review of the ontological nature of ethical leadership indicates how organizational leaders function as role models and how members of the organization identify themselves with the organization ideal as embodied in the leader’s ideal. Further, we explain how the actions of organizational leaders as parental figures and role
models are capable of altering followers’ perception of their individualities and their realities. We argue that organizational leaders can and should use their power of influence (as role models) to make their followers recognize the inherent advantages and challenges of a diverse workforce and workplace. We point out that the inability of our leaders to manage the diversity in our society and institutions poses a serious threat to the nation’s security. On this basis, we suggest that ethical leadership seems to be an appropriate form of leadership behavior for managing a diverse workforce capable of achieving the goals of an organization. Finally, five ethical leadership approaches for creating and sustaining effective management of workforce diversity are suggested.

**Keywords:** Workforce Diversity, Ethical Leadership, Ethical Climate, Cultural Orientations.

---

**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of workforce diversity and organizational performance has much been debated in the last five decades in the literature dealing with management and organization behavior. Some scholars see workforce diversity and organizational culture as responsible for all manner of positive development and negative ills in society and organizations (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Thus, it has been suggested that a better understanding of the concept would allow employees in organizations to solve problems and improve performance. Diversity issues are now considered important and are projected to become even more important in the future due to increasing differences in the population of many countries. In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and religious diverse society whether national or global, the issue of workforce diversity and the challenges it brings along cannot be overemphasized. Consequently, there has been increasing calls for leaders who can and willing to manage workforce diversity especially in an ever increasing global economy.

Nigeria is one of the most diverse countries in the world. With a population of approximately 184 million inhabitants, Nigeria accounts for 47 percent of West Africa’s population, and has one of the largest populations of youth in the world (World Bank, 2017). The country is a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse society with a federation that consists of 36 autonomous states (World Bank, 2017). Such a diverse and heterogeneous society carries with it a daunting challenge of managing a diverse workforce. Similarly, a nation with diverse socio-cultural, ethnic as well as religious backgrounds is an ideal setting for studying the challenges of ethical leadership and the management of workforce diversity. Secondly, insight into how workforce diversity in a heterogeneous society impact organizational praxis should be of immense benefit to both managers and employees. Thirdly, it would also be interesting to gain an understanding of how employee behaviors derived from a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, diverse age groups, etc would impact organizational performance.

As a result of her cultural, social, ethnic, religious, age, generational and gender diversity, Nigeria’s workforce consists of a complex and heterogeneous groupings. Changing demographic profiles, presence of more women at workplace, globalization and changing work priorities, among others, have not only increased the diversity of the nation’s workforce, but also made it more complex to manage. Employees from various culture, different generations, ethnic background, religion, nationalities, different linguistic patterns and belonging from various cultural backgrounds are increasingly brought to work together in the same organizations chasing similar and sometimes conflicting goals for themselves as well as
their employers. It is therefore important for organizations to design policies and practices capable of cultivating and sustaining a harmonious workplace with a diverse workforce. Increasingly, organizations are been called upon to focus on problems and challenges that are rooted in workforce and workplace diversity and to search for ways to become totally inclusive organizations. The reason is that workforce and workplace diversity carries with it enormous advantages in terms of gaining greater competitive advantage and enhancing productivity. On the other hand, it has been shown that workforce and workplace diversity produces organizational conflicts, and if not properly managed can endanger organizational performance (Bello, 2012; Cox, 1994). Managing and valuing diversity is a key component of effective people management, which can improve workplace productivity. Unmanaged diversity in the workplace is an impediment to the achievement of organizational goals. Consequently, diversity can be perceived as a “double-edged sword”: It can enhance organizational performance and it can also bring out a decrease in organizational productivity. The discourses and counter-discourses on workforce diversity came into being mainly to further the availability of equal opportunities in the workplace and to equally prevent organizational conflicts that arise from diversities of interests, goals and aspirations. This equal opportunity “philosophy” is aimed at ensuring that organizations make the most out of the differences from a diverse workforce rather than losing competencies which might provide the organization with more resource advantage. The ever increasing mobility and interaction of people from diverse backgrounds as a result of globalization and other economic and political changing phenomena have put most organizations under pressure to embrace diversity at the workplace or remain uncompetitive. Developments at the national and global economic arena indicate that workplace and workforce diversity will increase significantly in the near future as a result of breakdown of hitherto erected taboos and barriers, demographic changes, interracial marriages, diverse customer base, etc.

It is possible to assert that although organizations are faced with a number of competitive challenges, one that appears to stand out prominently is that of managing workforce diversity. In fact, it could be argued that one of the greatest challenges facing organizations today is that of managing workforce and workplace diversity for organizational effectiveness, performance and its competitiveness in the marketplace. Diversity, in this context, not only involves how people perceive themselves, but how they perceive others and the consequences of those perceptions. Those perceptions and attitudes toward diversity not only affect organization members’ interactions, but also and more importantly, organization performance. For employees from different social and professional backgrounds to effectively work together as a team, the leadership of the organization must deal ethically and effectively with organizational issues such as communication, recruitment, appraisal and promotion, motivation, marketing practices, product and service quality and delivery. Above all, all forms of organizational practices must be wrapped with acceptable ethical practices. Here, we see “ethics”, as doing what is good and acceptable as against doing what is wrong and unacceptable in a given social context. In the context of organizational praxis, ethical leadership is required for this daunting task. In this study, using a meta-synthesis as a methodological approach, we examine the current research stream in workforce and workplace diversity. Second, the concept of ethical
leadership is examined. It is argued here that our understanding of diversity and all its ramifications are products of our ethical and cultural perspectives of seeing and understanding social phenomena. Further, we explain how the actions of organizational leaders as parental figures and role models are capable of altering followers’ perception of their individualities and their realities. We argue that organizational leaders can use their power of influence to make their followers recognize the organization’s need for a diverse workforce and workplace. In addition, we challenge some of the prevailing organizational practices that put a lid on a diverse workforce. It is on this basis that we suggest that good ethical leadership is an appropriate form of leadership behavior or style capable of successfully managing a diverse workforce and workplace. Finally, five ethical leadership approaches for creating and sustaining effective management of workforce diversity are suggested.

**Workforce and Workplace Diversity: A Review of the Literature**

A review of the extant literature on workforce and workplace diversity indicates that the concepts are complex, controversial, and politically laden. As a result of its complexity, workforce diversity as an object of discourse and counter-discourse in the academia and organizational praxis has been conceptualized by researchers and practitioners from several viewpoints. Some scholars see it from a narrow perspective, while some others from a broader view. Scholars favorably disposed to a narrow definition argue that the concept of diversity should be restricted to specific cultural categories such as race and gender (e.g. Cross, Katz, Miller & Seashore, 1994; Nkomo, 1995). A number of scholars are of the opinion that diversity based on race, ethnicity and gender cannot be understood in the same way as diversity based on organizational functions, abilities or cognitive orientations (Nkomo, 1995). Moreover, the key issues of diversity are those that arise because of discrimination and exclusion of cultural groups from traditional organizations (Cross et al., 1994). Therefore, if diversity is a concept that is inclusive to all individuals, it will become very difficult to identify discrimination practices. The main concern of this standpoint is that a broad definition is an attempt at conflating all differences among people. Thus, diversity studies would then be reduced to the conclusion that “everyone is different.” Upholding this perspective, it is argued, the concept of diversity may become “nothing more than a benign, meaningless concept” (Nkomo, 1995).

To some scholars bent on a broader definition (e.g., Jackson, May & Whitney, 1995), there is a kind of conceptual and theoretical chutzpah to this line of reasoning. Thus, skeptical scholars insist that the danger in narrowly defining diversity is that only one dimension of cultural diversity (race, age, ethnicity, or gender) is by implication the subject of research at a given point in time. Since a cultural diversity dimension interacts with other dimensions of diversity (e.g., sexual orientation, gendered role allocation, age and religion, etc), it is argued that a narrow concept of diversity would be inadequate by failing to recognize the interactive power of these diversity constructs.

Advocates of a broad definition (e.g. Jackson, May & Whitney, 1995) argue that diversity encompasses all the possible ways people can differ. Individuals, according to this school of thought, do not only differ because of their race, gender, age and other demographic categories, but also because of their values, abilities, organizational function, tenure and personality. They contend that an individual has multiple identities and that the manifold dimensions cannot be isolated in an organizational setting.
Scholars bent on this line of argumentation, argue that apart from bringing their race, age, ethnicity, and gender, individuals also carry along with them their particular knowledge, personality, and cognitive style to the workplace. Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of a heterogeneous workforce, the interactive effects of multi-dimensional diversity have to be addressed. In addition, it is argued that a broadening of the concept of diversity has a potential positive effect on diversity management programs, as it will be more acceptable if it is all inclusive i.e. not only oriented towards specific demographic groups of employees (Thomas, 1991).

Theoretically the workplace diversity literature highlights three different theoretical frameworks for the examination of the possible effects of workplace diversity. The first is social categorization theory (Turner, 1985), which describes the categorization of people based on salient attributes like gender, ethnicity, religion or age, resulting in stereotyping on the basis of these differences. The second is similarity/attraction theory (Berscheid & Walster, 1978), which asserts that similarity on salient and non-salient attributes such as race or values increases interpersonal attraction and attachment. The third is information and decision-making theory, which examines the impact of distribution of information and expertise on work-teams (Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996).

For our purpose in this paper, the term, workforce diversity, means similarities and differences among employees in terms of age, cultural background, work experience, professional belongingness, physical abilities and disabilities, race, ethnicity, skin color, cognitive style, physical appearance, religion, gender, professional belongingness and sexual orientation. Diversity is a common issue in the workforce environment. In some companies, employees often get discriminated or misunderstood because of diverse features or religious background. Workforce diversity addresses many issues such as language barriers, religious difference, cultural differences, gender discrimination etc (Cox, 1994). Such issues if not resolved properly can provide the basis for conflicts in an organization and if not properly handled can give rise to ineffectiveness.

Workplace diversity refers to differences between and among persons(workforce) employed in the organization (workplace). Organization members have different individualities or traits (biological, genetic, social, cognitive, training, profession, experiences, etc), which they bring to the organization. In short, there is the question of ontological/existential differences among members of an organization that is made up of a diverse workforce. Essentially, organization members vary in nearly all aspects of their being. Thompson (2002) opines that each individual is a member of variety of social groups, such as gender and religion, and these have a significant bearing on people’s experiences and of becoming who they are. Differences in members of an organization can be discerned from the way they think, the way they react to issues and the basis of their motivation, including the effort they put into their work.

Generally, there is empirical support for the assumption that all dimensions of diversity can lead to positive as well as negative effects (Jackson et al., 2003). As noted earlier, social categorization theory, emphasize that similarities and dissimilarities can lead to categorizations which, in turn, lead to favoring one’s in-group to the detriment of one or more out-groups’ social affinity or inclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). On an intra-group level, this approach is typically referred to as relational demography. To be sure, relational demography suggests that the more similar an individual is to a social unit in demographic characteristics,
the more positive will be his/her work-related attitudes and behaviors (Riordan, 2000). Thus, categorizations within a work group (based on an attribute such as gender, race, or age) can lead to the problematic formation of sub-groups in an organization (“us” versus “them”).

**Ethical Leadership and the Management of Workforce Diversity**

The discourse on the behaviors or styles of leadership is as old as the discipline of the social sciences itself. To provide a discussion of the different types of leadership behavior is of course beyond the scope of this paper. In theoretical accounts of leadership effectiveness, scholars examine the leadership elements and processes that enhance employee performance by proposing theories that depict a leader’s behavior in a given task or context. Some of these theories primarily address leader characteristics based on employee preferences (e.g. implicit leadership theory). Others provide insight into the reinforcement theories based on social learning principles, which help to understand why certain work behaviors are more likely to appear. Some theories address both leadership characteristics and contextual conditions of leadership.

Leadership is defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2007). Theoretically, there are three basic ways to explain how people become leaders: the trait leadership theory, the great event theory and the process leadership theory (Bass, 1990). Trait theory is a situation where some personality traits may lead people naturally into leadership roles. A crisis or important event may cause a person to rise to the occasion, which brings out extraordinary leadership qualities in an ordinary person; this is the Great Events Theory.

The trait leadership theory can be contrasted with the process theory which depicts a situation when leadership skills are learnt. According to Burns (1978), the leadership process occurs in one of two ways, either transformational or transactional. Transformational leadership is concerned with developing a vision that informs and expresses the organization’s mission and lays the foundation for the organization’s strategies, policies and procedures. The transformation leader uses strategies and techniques to empower the followers, enhance their self-efficacy and change their values, norms, and attitudes, which are consistent with the leader’s vision. Transformational leadership style seeks to improve the condition of the followers in order to effectively and efficiently achieve the goals of the organization. The transformational leader uses four forms of behavior; inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) argue that leaders may be authentic transformational and pseudo transformational. Pseudo transformational leaders are self-centered, unreliable, power-hungry, and manipulative. Authentic transformational leaders have a moral character, a strong concern for self and others, and ethical values, which are deeply embedded in the vision.

Another form of leadership behavior is transactional leadership. Transactional leadership is a part of a style of leadership that focuses on supervision, organization, and performance; it is a style of leadership in which leaders promote compliance by followers through both rewards and punishments. Whereas a transformational leader is concerned with the allocation of resources, monitoring, and directing followers to achieve a given task, the transactional leader influences followers through the use of rewards, sanctions, and formal authority or position to induce followers’ compliance behavior. The transactional leader presumes that the employee will not do anything except for a transaction in which the payment for service is large enough.
to motivate the employee to perform. In transactional leadership style, the employee does nothing out of a sense of loyalty and selflessness toward the organization but only acts as a means of gaining payment in cash or in kind.

**Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership is leadership that is directed by respect for ethical beliefs and values and for the dignity and rights of others (Watts, 2008). It is thus related to concepts such as trust, honesty, consideration, charisma and fairness. Furthermore, since ethics is concerned with the kinds of values and morals an individual or a society finds desirable or appropriate, an ethical leadership behavior is the behavior that tends to project these kinds of values and morals in an organization. And since ethics is concerned with the virtuousness of individuals and their motives, an ethical leader’s choices are also influenced by his/her moral development (Northouse, 2016).

Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005, p. 120) defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and, decision-making”. The definition suggests that ethical leader can set the example for others and withstand any temptations that may occur along the way. In a similar vein, Freeman & Stewart, (2006) describe an ethical leader as person with “right values” and “strong character”, that set examples for others and withstand temptations. Ethical leaders are stakeholders in organizations, striving to achieve the purpose, vision and value of his/her realm without compromising self-interest (Bello, 2012).

Ethical leaders embody the purpose, vision, and values of the organization and of the constituents, within an understanding of ethical ideals. They connect the goals of the organization with that of the internal employees and external stakeholders. Ethical leaders understand that positive relationships with all organization’s stakeholders are the gold standard for all organizational efforts. Good quality relationships built on respect and trust are the most important determinants of organizational success. According to Bello (2012), ethical leaders understand that these kinds of relationships come from of fundamental principles such as trust, respect, integrity, honesty, fairness, equity, justice and compassion.

Thus, ethical leaders are expected to focus on moral values and fairness in decision making, consider the impact of organizational decisions on the outside world, and clearly communicate to employees how their actions at work contribute to the overall goals of the organization. Ethical leaders help give meaning to their employees’ work and ensure that organizational decisions are based on sound moral values (Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog& Folger, 2010). Ethical leaders are always making efforts to incorporate moral principles in their beliefs, values and behavior; they are committed to higher purpose, prudence, pride, patience, and persistence (Khuntia & Suar, 2004).

In a similar fashion, Treviño and Brown (2004) propose that an executive must be perceived as both a “moral person” and a “moral manager to have a reputation of ethical leadership.” A “moral person” is related to good character; the leader is honest and trustworthy, show concern for employee welfare and is seen as approachable. Treviño and Brown (2004) suggest that a “moral manager,” is one who leads others on the ethical dimension, allow employee to know what is expected, and holds them accountable. Moral managers set ethical standards, communicate ethics messages, use the position of leadership to promote ethical conduct at
work and use rewards and punishments to guide ethical behavior in the organization. An ethical leader clearly leads his or her organization on ethics and values. Followers know what they could expect of him or her, and they are conscious of what the leader expects of them from an ethics perspective. An unethical leader is perceived to be neither a moral person nor a moral manager.

**Characteristics of an Ethical Leader**

An ethical leader has an idea of goodness and respective goals and is willing to hold on to these goals even in challenging and difficult times. According to Bello (2012), a good leader is authentic, cares strongly about certain ideas that deserve robust concern and is a person of prudence. A study conducted on the understanding of executive ethical leadership (Treviño, Brown & Hartman, 2003) shows that ethical leaders are thought to be receptive and open, possess traditional leadership traits such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness. Ethical leadership includes transactional leader behaviors such as setting ethical standards and holding followers accountable for ethical conduct. Resick, Hanges, Dickson and Mitchelson (2006) identified six key attributes that characterized ethical leadership which include character and integrity; ethical awareness; community/people-orientation; motivating; encouraging and empowering; and managing ethical accountability. Freeman and Stewart (2006) identify seven characteristics of ethical leadership, which include: the articulation and embodiment of the purpose and values of the organization by the leader, (ii) the leader focuses on organizational success rather than on personal ego, (iii) the leader finds the best people and develop them, (iv) he/she creates a living conversation about ethics, values and the creation of value for stakeholders, (v) takes a charitable understanding of others’ values, (vi) makes tough calls while being imaginative, and (vii) creates stakeholder support and societal legitimacy.

**Ethical Leadership and Management of Workforce Diversity**

First, our conceptualization of diversity as a concept and organizational praxis is a product of our ethics; of what we consider as good or bad in our daily interaction with our compatriots. The way we behave to one another, that is, our ethical upbringing is also a product of our culture; our values, attitudes, belief systems, etc. For example, those brought up in a collectivistic-oriented society will relate to each other on the basis of group attachment. Individualistic oriented culture will, however, privilege situations that promote self-assertiveness over collective association. Universalistic oriented culture will tend to treat people equally on the basis of generalized criteria of judgment. On other hand, those from a particularistic culture will see people from a parochial perspective. Thus, from a cultural perspective, we can relate with people along the following dichotomy: achievement versus ascription; universalism versus particularism; individualism versus collectivism; and specificity versus diffuseness. Several studies have indicated the cultural relativity of these constructs and their bearings on the behavior of leaders across cultures (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010; Gelfand, Erez,& Aycan, 2007; Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Ogbor, 1990; Ogbor & Williams, 2003).

One of the core values in traditional African cultures is a leader’s moral obligation to direct the followers to do what is right. Several studies indicate that paternalism and or paternalistic tendency, which is a variant of African leadership behavior and authority relationship is rooted in the African culture of leaders’ moral obligation to set ethical standards, communicate ethics messages, use the position of leadership to promote ethical conduct at
work and use rewards and punishments to guide ethical behavior in the organization (Bello, 2012). In the traditional African culture, there are elaborate rules and mechanisms for sanctioning leaders who behave unethically, including, for example, exile or depose from power. In Nigeria, as in most African countries, ethical values are often used to regulate leader behavior as civil laws are not as extensively developed as in many Western societies (Jackson, 2004; Resick et al., 2011). Leaders are treated as role models whose behaviors will be observed and emulated by followers (Ogbor, 1990; Jackson, 2004). As a result of their leadership and authority positions, leaders are expected to play critical roles in influencing organization members’ social behavior and in shaping their ethical attitudes, acceptable social deviant behavior (Davis & Rothstein, 2006; Grojean, Resick, Dickson & Smith, 2004).

Based on the social identity model of leadership effectiveness (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; Van Knippenberg, 2011), team climate has the potential to influence a subordinate’s perception of leadership effectiveness. In particular, team ethical climate, as a shared and collective moral norm among team members, shapes individual judgments toward moral organizational practices and work attitudes, as well as evaluations of leader ethical behavior (Barnett & Vaicys, 2000). In addition to team factors, the cultural values of the members of an organization are another factor influencing employee judgments of leadership effectiveness. For example, Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen and Lowe (2009) found that cultural values can moderate the association between individual social beliefs and perceived leadership effectiveness or lack thereof. In this sense, a particular leadership behavior is more likely to create positive perceptions for employees with a matching cultural value orientation. In other words, ethical behavior is inseparable from ethical behavior.

Building on the social identity model of leadership effectiveness (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), this paper suggests that in line with the follower centric view (paternalistic) of leader behavior, ethical leaders are perceived by followers as displaying normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships. By so doing, leaders are in position to promote such conducts to followers through a two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making system (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Hence, ethical leaders are considered by employees to be honest, fair, and trustworthy. In line with ethical leadership theory, the extant literature has also found that leaders who discipline individuals when they violate moral standards and reward individuals when they follow appropriate standards are perceived by employees to be effective leaders (Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000).

Moreover, a fundamental argument within the ethical leadership literature is that ethical leaders influence a follower’s attitudes and behaviors via role modeling. The assumption is that exposure to ethical role models contributes to the positive evaluation of the target’s leadership effectiveness. Thus, subordinates are in a unique position to judge leadership effectiveness as they answer questions such as “what are the most important characteristics” or “whether the leader is effective” through a personal cognitive process. When searching for answers one would be inclined to look for the factors in the organization’s environment such as socialization, employee attitudes and belief systems, among others (Bandura, 1986). Role modeling processes, according to Bandura (1986) is a psychological matching process in...
which people observe, identify with, and imitate a target (the leader) vis-à-vis the environment.

Van Knippenberg (2011) is of the opinion that the dynamics of role modeling is at the core of ethical leadership practices. For one, they are both complementary with the social identity model of leadership effectiveness. The antecedents of ethical leadership and conditions for the social identity model predict that perceived leadership effectiveness is contingent on the extent to which a leader is perceived as representative of team prototypes (role modeling). For example, the way the culture of an organization perceives diversity, the way ethnic or gender diversity is appreciated will all be related to how the leader’s behavior vis-à-vis the culture of the organization are in congruent or in sync.

Van Knippenberg (2011) further opines that these team prototypes such organizational ethical codes of conduct, attitudes toward customers, quality of goods and services and value systems are driven by socially shared values and beliefs regarding desirable behaviors. These, in turn produce a team’s ethical climate. Thus, team ethical climate is capable of indicating team prototypes precisely because, according to Van Knippenberg, ethical climate reflects teams’ values and beliefs. Similarly, through internalized team processes of social identification, team ethical climate becomes a source of identification and of what constitutes what is an acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Conversely, leaders, as team members themselves are guided by these team values and beliefs.

That is why, it is suggested here that, although leaders, as role models are capable of shaping the behaviors of their followers, the values espoused by the organization culture can also condition the behavior of the leaders. Thus, when a leader is believed to engage in team-desired ethical behaviors (e.g., encouraging diversity in role allocation among members of the organization), he or she is better positioned to promote follower perceptions of leadership effectiveness. It is precisely along this line that Schminke, et al (2005) suggest that an organization’s ethical climate serves as a salient variable that helps individuals predict the behaviors of others and create clear role expectations for the leader. The same level of ethical leadership perception should result in differing evaluations of leadership effectiveness between individuals in different teams depending on the levels of team ethical climate. More specifically, ethical climate may augment the positive relationship between employee-perceived ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness perceptions.

**The Role of Ethical Leadership in Managing Workforce Diversity**

Up to this point, we have been examining the relationship between ethical leadership, ethical climate and employee behavior in terms of which they relate to workforce and workplace diversity. We noted, among other things, that an ethical leader serves as a role model, a pace setter and example for followers to emulate in organizational praxis. Over the past three decades the debates on the necessity or otherwise of a diverse workforce and workplace has been ongoing. The discourse has always been *how* to implement appropriate strategies for the management of workforce diversity. In the discourse also, the challenges of managing a diverse workforce have been brought to the fore. Equally researched are strategies for dealing with such challenges. We believe that success in the workplace as in other organizational settings depends on the behavior and the roles leaders bring to bear upon issues, problems and challenges. No major cultural shift within the context of an organization will happen unless top management wants it to happen.
Consequently, we suggest that, as in every other organizational practice (such as human resources practices, manufacturing, competitive strategies, etc) leaders should take the decisive role in appreciating, embracing and endorsing appropriate ethics strategies that favor the endorsement and collective participation of all organization members. We suggest the following four strategies:

**Avoidance of Quasi-Organizational Practices by Leaders**

Most frequently, organizational leaders have been known to display overt behaviors that confer a type of favoritism towards certain ethnic groups in an organization. The practice whereby leaders encourage the emergence of “in-group” and “out-group” categorization of the workforce in an organization, departments or sectional units is detrimental to the collective achievement of the goals of the organization. In some instances, this particularistic leadership behavior is ethically unproductive especially when leaders relate to subordinates on the basis of ethnicity or any other forms of affiliation (ethnic, religious, etc) differently from other members of the organization, department or team. Some organizational leaders make use of superfluous behavior in a passion to please kinsmen to the detriment of the collective goals. In a quasi showing of “love” with fellow “town person” leaders unwittingly sow the seeds of discrimination among members of the same team who do not share such affiliations. By quasi-organizational practices, I am simply referring to overt and covert actions in which leaders show unwarranted and undeserved outpouring of “love” to members of the organization in the name of “my fellow ethnic man,” or “we are from the same village,” or “we worship in the same church.” Such behavior is capable of creating nepotism, favoritism, jealousy and resentment among the “out-group” members of the same team or organization.

Addressing subordinates using particularistic languages or dialects does not augur well for organizational harmony; rather, it initiates, encourages and sustains the basis for discriminatory practices in an ethnic and culturally diverse workplace. The appeal for ethnic affiliation can only create a sense of belongingness among people from the same ethnic group. But in a multiethnic society such as Nigeria, such primordial identification on the basis of “in-group” and “out-group” categorizations of members of an organization along ethnicity lines is capable of creating ethnic subcultures within the overall organizational culture that are capable of working against the achievement of the goals and objectives of the organization.

**Creating and Sustaining a Gender-Neutral Ethical Climate in an Organization:** It is the role of ethical leaders to create and sustain a working environment that eschews gendered ideas in organizational practices. In a patriarchal and masculine culture such as Nigeria, this is a daunting task especially for transformational leaders. Unfortunately, being a masculine-oriented society, Nigeria is a society that is gender-sensitive in role allocation and performance. Certain occupational roles are reserved for female workers (such as marketers in the banking sector and nurses in the healthcare sector). However, this practice can backlash when it is unduly applied in situations or in roles that are gender-neutral.

It is true that women have made tremendous gains in the ranks of lower and middle management over the past 30 years, but the number of females reaching top positions has remained small. Women seem to advance only so far before hitting an invisible barrier – a glass ceiling. Although the reasons for these practices are numerous and complex, two are particularly instructive in our discussion here: gendered roles and gender bias.
Gendered roles: In the Nigerian society, some occupational roles are allocated in terms of gender. In addition, society has prescribed certain roles for males and other for females. For female employees, their triple roles as a mother, a home-maker and working woman can be very demanding. Putting in long hours is often necessary in order to demonstrate commitment and ambition. Some roles require extensive business travel, and in some fields, working in various roles in different national and international locations is the preferred path to promotion. These requirements put many women at a great disadvantage. Organizational leaders should foster harmony between work and family life, which is key to attracting and retaining talent. It can contribute to the company culture, and to a positive attitude and collaboration among employees. Another important point is for leaders not to make sweeping generalizations about different genders, and instead to consider the specifics on a case by case basis.

Gender bias: While outright discrimination towards women may not be part of today’s business environment, subtle instances of gender bias which discriminate against female employees still exist. In the past, gender biases were outright intentional acts of discrimination. Females are excluded from certain occupations such as engineering, while males are qualified to be doctors, female are seen as good in the nursing profession. Today, although that perception has changed, gender biases are still powerful as a result of cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interactions that inadvertently favor men. For example, effective leaders are deemed to be confident, assertive and strong – mostly masculine, while good marketers as in the banking industry are deemed to female – feminine attributes. When women act in a “confident and, assertive manner,” they can be viewed as aggressive, abrasive, and uncaring. If a woman leader demonstrates more female attributes, and is collaborative, empathic and nurturing, she is often considered lacking in leadership skills. As Ogbor and Ugherughe (2016) observed, the gendering of occupational ideas and organizational roles is discriminatory and dysfunctional in promoting organizational cohesiveness.

Religion and Close Fraternity with Discriminatory Tendencies: The proliferation and wave of a new religious consciousness in the fold of Pentecostalism has swept across Nigeria as far back as in the early seventies. This new awakening or re-awakening has also brought in new forms of identity and relationships’ attachment based on “one’s” church. “In their own congregation,” write Shorter and Njiru (2001), “neo-Pentecostals call each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’ They create a climate in which individuals help each other, finding them jobs and visiting them when they are sick.” This is a fundamental re-awakening of the communal life of the early Christians which is in harmony with the African sense of communalism and togetherness.

The mainline churches are recapturing the sense of community and the moral imperative of being a “brother keeper.” Nevertheless, this is opening up a risk of “over-fraternalization,” and is introducing a “spiritual ethnicity and religious nepotism” in the country, which has now been “imported” to work organizations. Many churches are not able to overcome the myopic vision of the human society championed by some Pentecostals, who considered themselves as the chosen race, called to live away from the world of sinners. Members of different churches tend to see their folks as brothers and sisters (and such with admiration). Unfortunately, the force of this fraternity and solidarity among themselves disentangles them from unifying
impulses of the wider human and Christian societies. Herein lays the root of discrimination both in the wider society and in specific work organizations.

The unfortunate development about this awakening, which is devoid of Christian-ness, is the consideration of those outside the immediate church’s family as “strangers.” This is more worrisome when this practice is reproduced and promoted by organizational leaders, heads of departments and sectional heads as a form of evangelism. This is manifested in early morning devotions when offices are closed to give room for prayer meetings, not very much unlike Moslem Friday afternoon prayer sessions. It is not uncommon to see what zealots called “the unbelievers” coming to offices late in order to avoid such early morning devotionals. The organizational leaders, who happened to be a fanatic or a fundamentalist is able to get followers (winning souls to Christ) by virtue of his or her position as a leader and as a role model he or she is able to win souls and new converts in the name of evangelism through the mechanisms of role modeling. The “new convert,” as it were, has now replaced his or her ego-ideal with that of the leader’s with the belief that that is the organization prototype. What this entails is the religious transformation of the individual to fit neatly into the one prescribed by the leader in the workplace, in this way religious diversity (or freedom of worship) is conveniently blanketed in the name of serving God. Here, the subordinates or followers lose their identities by taking in a new identity as prescribed by the leader.

Freud (1984) explained how this process occurs, i.e., how group (organization) psychology was an extension of individual (the leader’s) psychology. Sigmund Freud suggests that it is through this process of identification that the individual surrenders his/her individuality and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader (Freud, 1984). Iyamabhor, M., Ogbor, J. O., & Awosigho, O. P. (2021)

When one becomes a leader of a group (e.g., a team, an organization, a department) the person gives up some of his/her individuality and embrace the ideals or values of the organization as espoused by the team. The extent to which this happens depends on three things, namely (i) the context under which it occurs, (ii) the leader’s ability to influence the identification, and (iii) the degree to which the followers (organization members) identify with the leader’s ideal. According to Carr (1999), this identification may be reinforced through different forms of gratifications, including, but not limited to promotion, supervisory roles, favorable appraisal and other forms of recognition, which further creates a circle of identification with the leader’s ideal resulting in what Carr calls the “passion to please” the leader and what the group (organization) stands for.

In the work organization it can be readily comprehended how the reified organization and/or its leaders can be raised to the status of an ego-ideal. Indeed, the organization and its leaders, through symbolic, material and other means, may satisfy narcissistic needs so well that employee views their own identity in terms of their work context. Several studies have suggested that a selecting and molding of a character may occur in trying to achieve the organization ideal, and that to resist such molding would risk the disapproval of the parental figure (the office supervisor, the manager, the boss, the “Oga”), the team and its members (the organization, the department, etc) and the psychological trauma associated with being excluded.

Unknowingly to some organization leaders, certain pseudo organizational practices, such as early morning “office devotional,” office prayer meetings and other religious intrusion in the
workplace are capable of working against the spirit of diversity in the workplace. These practices are discriminatory in the sense that they promote particularistic criteria of evaluation in recognizing “my church-member” in place of “my organization member”. By so doing, leaders unknowingly create an organizational ethical climate that promotes favoritism and workplace discrimination.

**Ascriptive Criteria in an Organization’s Ethical Climate**

In an organization, the criteria for role allocation, duties and so on can be classified along the dimensions of either ascriptive orientation or achievement orientation. In a culture that favors ascriptive criteria, occupational and organizational roles, distribution of rewards and criteria for judgment are made in consideration of who the person is and not what the person can do. In the Nigerian society, for example, ascriptive criteria are very much in vogue right from the seat of power, ministerial and sensitive position are reserved exclusively for some ethnic groups. In the organization, certain roles and positions are also demarcated and awarded in terms of a person’s affiliation or attachment to particular groups. Ascriptive/particularistic cultural practices are manifested in the form of (i) theocracy; (ii) gerontocracy; (iii) hereditary legitimacy; (iv) paternalism; (v) symbolic titles; and (iv) gender-consideration.

An ethical climate that favors ascriptive criteria is not diversity friendly. It promotes discrimination, alienation, apathy and a demotivated workforce. Studies have indicated instances whereby organization leaders allocate favorable roles and/or supervisory to their kinsmen, while promotion is based not on competence but for reasons that have no bearing with job performance (Ogbor, 1990). These ascriptive practices do not only promote annihilation, alienation, and discrimination, they are also dysfunctional to organizational performance and effectiveness.

In the context of effective management of workplace and workforce diversity, we are suggesting that organizational ethical leaders should create an ethical climate that privileges achievement orientation. In an achievement oriented society, leaders (whether organizational or national) insist on evidence of “what a person can do” (e.g. scholastic examinations, quality and quantity of output, etc.) in determining the criteria for role recruitment and allocation, and in determining the criteria for distribution of rewards. Similarly, promotion within the context of the of work organizations is based upon merit.

**Universalism as Against Particularism**

Closely related to the achievement/ascriptive criteria is what is known as universalistic and particularistic criteria for judgment and treatment of persons and situations. For the ethically minded leader, the axiom of “what is good for the goose is good for the gander” is the guiding principle. It becomes official policy in all relationship in organizational practice. In a society or organizational culture that fosters universalistic criteria as the acceptable way to ethically behave (ethical universalism), a person’s eligibility, worth, and treatment in relationship to social role or institution are not determined by considerations irrelevant to the stated functions of that role or institution. Rules governing evaluation of persons in an organization are universally applied without particularistic considerations of criteria that have nothing to do with that role. In an organization culture with a strong ethical climate and promotes universalism in the treatment of members, fear of discrimination is reduced to the barest minimum; spirit of the “sameness” is shared organization-wide while competition for roles,
promotion and other forms of official recognition is played out in a healthy non-combative and non-discriminatory work environment.

In a particularistic culture that insists on role allocation on the basis of favoritism, the byproduct is discrimination which inhibits attempts to promote diversity in the workplace. It should be noted that many members of several organizations have been victims of discrimination as a result of absence of role-congruency. Particularism, in this context, discourages a diverse workforce and leads to a workplace imbibed with mediocre products or services. As many studies have shown, this is manifested in organizations filled with homogenous workforce based on ethnicity or religious affiliations. Such organizations are characterized with what is generally known as “group-think”, the inability to think outside of the box.

Thus, an ethical climate that breeds particularistic tendencies creates a culture of conformity, discourages creativity and innovation. At the end, such an organizational culture produces a dysfunctional and myopic workforce that is apathetic to change and losses whatever competitive advantages it possesses in the marketplace. It is not an exaggeration when the former American President, Barack Obama, credited France’s victory in 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament as a result of a rare blend of players drawn from diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. In the long-run, ethical universalism has its advantages over ethical particularism.

CONCLUSION

Everyone nowadays seems to be talking about diversity and how good it is especially in an ethnic and socio-culturally diverse society as Nigeria. The public discourse in which this consciousness has been articulated in terms of its benefits is a welcome development. However, many organizational leaders have not paid enough attention to the realization of diversity’s full potential in a diverse and multicultural society such as Nigeria and there are a number of reasons for this. Specifically in this paper, we have argued that several pseudo-organizational practices are not ethically supportive for the development and sustainability of a diverse workforce with its benefits and advantages. We have pointed out that organizations in this globalization era cannot afford to cling into the practice of having a homogenous workforce. As a result of intense competition and a wider customer base, the era of workforce discrimination is gone because it is inimical not only to particular organizations, but also national competitiveness in a global economy. For instance, we pointed out that leaders, as a matter of urgency, must discourage the practice of primordial identification in a diverse work environment. This does not imply a rejection of one’s identity, but an acceptance of others identities.

In a similar manner, religious practices in our work organizations should be tempered with a little understanding and tolerance with those who many not share in our denominational faiths. There is nothing wrong in the proclamation of one’s religious faith. After all, religious freedom is embedded in the Nigerian Constitution. There is nothing inherently wrong neither with religion nor in its practices as long as its adherents are drawn to the transcendence on a personal level. Religion and its practice becomes dangerous when it becomes too much of an “opium of the people” which it is then used by leaders to control and suppress diversity of opinion and diversity of behavior in as much as such behaviors are not in any way dysfunctional to the realization of the goal of the organization. Being a society that strongly
uphold patriarchal and ascriptive/particularistic values, the gendering of organizational practices and roles seems to be more pronounced in Africa and in Nigeria, in particular, than anywhere else. If not so, where else in the universe would a sitting president (President Mohammadu Buhari of Nigeria) proclaim to the world that his wife “belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room” (BBC, 2016).

Undoubtedly, there is a lot going on in the areas of diversity sensitivity training in our organizations. Everyone is insisting on it. The labor unions are suggesting it. Corporate executives are demanding it and want it inscribed in corporate mission and value statements. Activists and other pressure groups in society in general require it. These demands are the results of the perceived benefits of a diverse workforce. At the end, however, the ball is in the leaders’ court, as the saying goes. In this paper, we insist that organizational leaders have the privileged role as role-models to start and lead the call for an all-inclusive diverse organization model. Expectedly, such a model can become a model that society can emulate.

In the history of business operations, corporate executives have been seen to have developed corporate cultures that proactively enacted good ethical behaviors that spilled over to society at large.

The rhetoric of workplace and workforce diversity as being espoused in organizations’ mission and value statements are not enough remedy for the prevailing ethical climate in contemporary organizations. The current practices in organizations in which the prevailing axiom is “who know who” is unfortunately the precursor for competitive inertia. What is needed is a proactive movement on the part of organizational leaders by creating an ethical climate that favors workplace diversity. It is suggested here that the creation of an ethical climate and organizational culture that promotes workforce and workplace diversity should constitute one of organization’s major corporate social responsibility initiatives. At a time when stakeholders (customers, constituents, pressure groups) are expecting greater corporate accountability, apathy to the challenges of workplace and workforce diversity is to society’s own peril. Nigerians are all witnessing how this tragedy is been played out at the national level!

References


