

AMBIDEXTROUS LEADERSHIP AND PRODUCTIVE OUTCOMES IN EMERGING ECONOMIES: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

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Abstract

The attainment of the sustainable development goals, especially in times of global economic uncertainty and turbulence requires deliberate actions of leaders. Emerging economies, strive to harness their human resources to attain greater levels of production. Understanding the right leadership approach to attaining valuable productive outcomes is therefore of significant interest to nations of the world. This paper theoretically examined the emergence of ambidextrous leadership as a leadership approach that can help galvanize the human resources of emerging economies towards the attainment of greater productive outcomes. The review began by underlining social capital theory as the theoretical foundation for leadership ambidexterity, followed by both conceptual and empirical reviews to clarify the importance of ambidextrous leadership for productive outcomes in emerging economies. The review showed that ambidextrous leadership behaviour is important for facilitating transformative goals of nations. Specifically, the study identified leaders opening and closing behaviours, which are proxies of leaders' ambidexterity as important enablers of productive outcomes. The study recommends that leaders, by their opening and closing behaviours, should encourage members' both internal and external focus in order to accelerate production for the overall development of emerging economies.

Keywords: *Ambidexterity, Exploitation, Exploration, Opening behaviour, Closing behaviour*

Introduction

The issue of national development, which has been a long standing concern for nations globally has been significantly highlighted since the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have now been replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing inference with the SDGs, Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations in the *Sustainable Development Goals Report* (2021, 2), stated that

“the global community is at a critical moment in its pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” because “more than a year into the global pandemic, millions of lives have been lost, the human and economic toll has been unprecedented, and recovery efforts so far have been uneven, inequitable and insufficiently geared towards achieving sustainable development.” By the Declaration of the General Assembly of the United Nations during its seventieth anniversary held in New York in September 2015, seventeen cardinal transformative objectives were activated as Sustainable Development Goals in furtherance of the United Nations agenda for “transforming our world” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, nd.), through the promotion of people, planet and prosperity. The attainment of these SDGs has posed a great challenge for nations across the globe especially with the heightened competition brought about by globalization, and the increasingly turbulent and uncertain environment resulting from the global economic meltdown and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leaders are now required to be more adept at pursuing their critical development goals, which in the last two decades has heightened global competition and placed enormous demands on nations. Nations are equally required to be more innovative, entrepreneurial and competitive in addressing the development problematic confronting them with greater need for responsible consumption and increased production. Trainer (2011, 125) argued that “in recent times, politics and public policy in western democracies have been shaped by a number of trends and influences including the emergence of the ‘competition state’” as “the idea of ‘territorial competition’ both within and across national boundaries is now widely accepted in academic literature, as well as in the language of policymakers and politicians”. Consequently, the leadership of nations are increasingly required to think and act like business leaders in order to harness the potentials inherent within the environment to meet their production

needs and address their development challenges. In order to properly address the SDGs and similar development programmes, there is an increasing need to identify and adopt models of leadership that can fast track production. From extant literature, it has been revealed that one leadership approach that appear to do this by exploiting internal capabilities while at the same time exploring external possibilities with a sense of competition and collaboration all at the same time is ambidextrous leadership, which was introduced by Ducan (1976)

and made popular by March (1991) (Alghamdi, 2018).

The purpose of this paper was therefore to theoretically examine the concept of leadership ambidexterity with a view to highlighting its predictive relationship with productive outcomes of emerging economies in their quest to achieve the SDGs. The relationship under examination is illustrated by the conceptual framework in figure 1.

Conceptual Framework

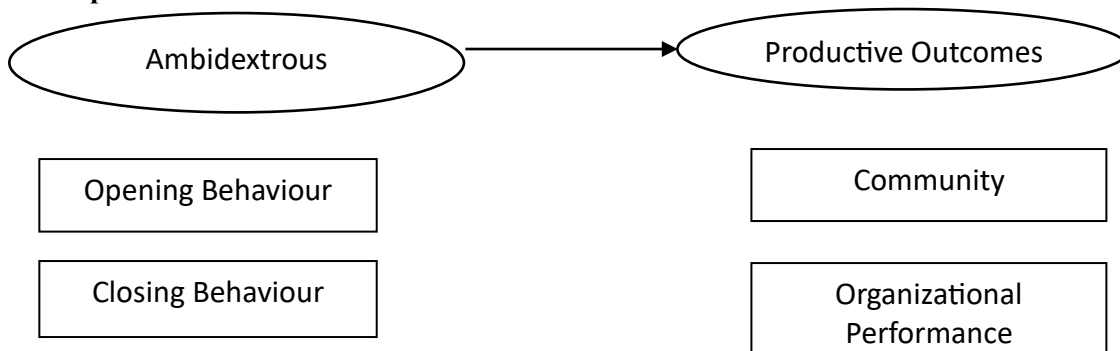


Figure 1: Ambidextrous Leadership and Productive Outcomes
Source: Desk Research (2024)

Theoretical Review

The socio-economic baseline theory that underpins this study is the social capital theory that is largely traced to Putnam (1993). This theory emphasizes the need to harness both internal and external networks of relationships and is in tandem with ambidextrous leadership that is both inward and outward looking.

Social Capital Theory

Putnam (1993) is acknowledged to have popularized the concept of social capital (Ponthieux, 2004). Putnam (1993) as cited in Asawo (2021) argued that social capital comprises the “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993, 35). Communities are made up of people who relate among themselves and with members of other communities. By these relationships, networks are established requiring trust, which serves as emotional glue that binds these relationships and determine the allocation of resources equitably. This is in tandem with the position of Rose (1998) who holds the view that social capital entails both formal or informal social networks by which the allocation of goods and services is achieved. According to Asawo (2021), social capital, emphasizes civic engagement and thus shapes the attitudes of organizational members through the process of socialization and integration.

There are two dimensions of social capital in literature. These are the bonding and bridging social capital.

Bonding Social Capital

Bonding Social Capital refers to the strengthening of the internal networks of group or community members. According to Friedman (2002), bonding social capital serves as a reinforcement to the bonds of loyalty and support within the group. Thus Asawo (2021) argues that bonding social capital emphasizes the need for people who are members of the same community and have knowledge of each other to get deeply involved with each other in demonstration of their relationship commitments. So, bonding social capital fortifies internal community relationships both vertically and horizontally. The importance of bonding social capital in homogenous groups like communities cannot be over emphasized as Smulders and Beugelsdijk (2003) have argued that bonding social capital enforces a closer tie in such groups. This is made possible because bonding social capital is characterized by the value process of trust, reciprocity, civic culture including tolerance, inter-group co-operation, and voluntarism (Kasozzi, 2004). It can thus be argued that leaders closing behaviour requires bonding social capital to thrive in the community.

Bridging Social Capital

Bridging social capital, which is the second dimension of social capital, connects people across heterogeneous communities. This is unlike bonding social capital that appears to be best suited for homogeneous communities. Communities are open systems that require strong links with other communities to survive, and bridging social capital plays the role of creating the links. Putnam (2000) posited that bridging social capital represents bonds of connectedness that are formed across different social groups (Smulders & Beugelsdijk, 2003). In other words, bridging social capital, unlike bonding social capital that is internally focused, is outward-looking (Friedman, 2002) and creates networks that bring people together from different social backgrounds and of different interests thus creating new common ground (Asawo, 2021). Thus, Paxton (1999) describes bonding social capital as cross-cutting ties. It can thus be argued that bridging social capital is an enabler for leaders opening behaviour as according it connect the community to external possibilities through strategic external linkages. With the internal and external outlook of social capital happening at the same time, social capital theory is an appropriate underlying socio-economic baseline theory for this study on ambidextrous leadership behaviour and community development.

Conceptual Review

Organizational Ambidexterity

According to Sulphrey & Alkahtani (2017), ambidexterity literally refers to the capacity to use both hands with equal proficiency. Recently, the term has been used within the context of business organizations to refer to an organization's capacity to leverage current knowledge, technologies, and customers/markets in order to accelerate long-term growth (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). In a broad sense, organizational ambidexterity refers to an organization's capacity to efficiently leverage its existing skills while also exploring novel possibilities for products and/or services (Patel, Messersmith & Lepak, 2013). Thus, organizations that are ambidextrous have internal and external focus both at the same time. Buttressing this point, O'Reilly & Tushman (2008) argue that organizational ambidexterity refers to an organization's capacity to investigate and use both internal and external resources simultaneously in order to address current business needs while being adaptable to market changes. Similarly, Armour (2015) posits that organizational ambidexterity is the capacity to focus on, and balance the various alignment and adaptability techniques with an equal success rate.

Alignment and adaptability according to Gibson & Birkinshaw (2004) represent the two sides of organizational ambidexterity, with alignment referring to the internal focus on maintenance actions and incremental innovation, and adaptability representing the external focus on radical innovative and proactive change. In other words, while alignment ensures certain level of consistency across all activities in which the organization has acquired the required competence, adaptability ensures that the organization enjoys incremental innovation. Alignment and adaptability are thus entrenched in the two measures of organizational ambidexterity used in this study, which are exploitation and exploration. For, according to Gupta, Smith and Shalley (2016, 693), "ambidexterity refers to the synchronous pursuit of both exploration and exploitation via loosely coupled and differentiated subunits or individuals, each of which specializes in either exploration or exploitation". Thus, Acevedo and Diaz-Molina (2019, 6) argue that ambidextrous firms "focus on their ability to exploit their current capabilities while simultaneously exploring fundamentally new competencies".

Exploitation as a Measure of Organizational Ambidexterity

Business organizations benefit from a variety of resources, both human and material. To ensure that businesses continue to grow and perform well, these resources must be fully utilized in order for them to remain competitive and maintain a competitive edge over their industry rivals. Exploitative behaviour, which is mostly associated with the efficient use of prior knowledge base (Gupta et al, 2006), is thus a proxy for organizational ambidexterity. Piao and Zajac (2016) describe exploitation as the repetition and incremental refinement of a firm's existing products with the goal of strengthening the existing product-market domains. An exploitative organization is heavily reliant on current organizational resources, such as experience, skills, and competencies, in order to adapt to new business frontiers, such as technology, new product development, and markets.

An exploitative firm is committed to continuous development of existing products and services through incremental innovation. Organizations engage in exploitation activities in order to meet market demands with minimal modification to existing routines, goods, and technology (Kohtamäki, Kautonen & Kraus, 2010). O'Cass, Heirati, and Ngo (2014) expressed a similar view by stating that exploitation enables businesses to maintain established practices while enhancing

resource efficiency and cost savings. This enables firms to remain competitive and meet customer demand on a constant basis through product diversity and service offerings, while enhancing efficiency, minimizing failure, and continuously developing existing knowledge. More precisely, exploitation is concerned with the enhancement and efficiency of the organization's operations in all areas.

Exploration as a Measure of Organizational Ambidexterity

Exploration and exploitation are mutually exclusive from an ambidexterity perspective. To ensure the organization's current viability, exploitation must be conducted concurrently with exploration to ensure future viability (Hsu, Lien & Chen, 2013). Nevertheless, every company organization seeks to maintain viability and competitiveness in the commercial market. To achieve this level of competitiveness, business owners intend to explore new business frontiers and gain new information or methods of conducting business that are superior and distinct from those of their competitors. Thus, exploration enables businesses or business organizations to acquire and create knowledge and information from any angle of the organization's surroundings, as it encompasses untapped abilities and the pursuit of new information (Jurksiene & Pundziene, 2016).

According to this view, exploration is a critical proxy of organizational ambidexterity, which is frequently associated with the acquisition of new information via learning and creativity (Gupta et al., 2006). The organization's goal is to be the market leader for their products and services, and as such, they continue to explore new knowledge and opportunities in the marketplace, ascertain the needs of their customers, and maintain their loyalty to their products and services, all in order to maintain a competitive edge in the industry. To maintain a competitive edge in a competitive industry, business owners must employ continuous improvement mechanisms and actively participate in identifying new business prospects or creating new demand by anticipating their present and future customers' desires.

Recently, scholars have advanced the discussion on organizational ambidexterity to include leaders' behaviour, which in this study is considered to be very crucial for increasing production in emerging economies. In the next section, the literature on leadership ambidextrous behaviours is examined.

Leadership Ambidextrous Behaviour

The frontiers of ambidexterity have been extended to incorporate the role of leadership behaviour, hence the construct of leadership ambidexterity is now a subject of leadership research. Alghamdi (2018), justified this interest in leadership behaviour as critical to organizational ambidexterity by noting that leadership is widely acknowledged as the most influential factor to workers' innovation and organizational development and therefore key to both exploitation and exploration behaviour of subordinates. Relying on the work of Rosing et al. (2011), Alghamdi (2018, 3) identified the two leadership ambidextrous behaviours to include closing leadership behavior that encourages exploitative action and opening leadership behaviour that encourages explorative action, with the possibility of a combination of both behaviours through "flexibility over time to switch between both behaviors once a situation entails".

Leaders' Closing Behaviour

Closing Leadership Behaviour, according to Alghamdi (2018, 3) "is defined as leader behaviour that decreases variance in subordinates' behaviours through taking corrective actions, putting specific guidelines, and monitoring goal attainment. This suggests that closing behaviour facilitates adherence to norms among members of a social unit as they set their eyes on accomplishing the goals of the group, while maintaining control. This is seen in the definition of closing behaviour by AlKhawaldeh (2020, 69), as "a set of behaviours that include taking corrective actions, setting guidelines, and monitoring the achievement of goals" which is best suited for ensuring the implementation of tasks, achievement of efficiency, and reduction variations.

Leaders' Opening Behaviour

Opening leadership behaviour, according to Alghamdi (2018, 3) refers to "leader behaviour that increases variance in subordinates' behaviours through encouraging them to do things differently and to experiment, giving subordinates' opportunity for autonomous thinking and executing, and underpinning subordinates' attempts to contest a current situation. This indicates that creativity is enhanced by leaders' opening behaviour as members of the social unit are encouraged to unleash their creative ideas. This is therefore a good platform for innovative ideas to thrive. For, according to AlKhawaldeh (2020, 69), opening behaviour represents a set of behaviours that encourages "experimenting with different things, giving space for independent thinking and performance and

providing support to challenge tiring methods and procedures”.

Empirical Review on Leadership and Productive Outcomes

Leadership Ambidexterity and Community Development

Leadership behaviour has been widely researched and considered as a predictor to several organizational outcomes, although some scholars have argued that such studies have not been specific in identifying the particular leadership behaviour in question. For instance, Mascareno, Rietzschel and Wisse (2021, 531) argued that even though leadership has been proposed as a critical factor in stimulating innovation, there is still the lack of “insight into which specific behaviours leaders can display to influence idea generation, idea promotion and idea implementation”. This situation is very similar to the studies on leadership and community development. The role of leadership in community development has been widely researched with empirical evidence of a positive association between leadership and the level of development attainable in any community. In the study on the role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovation, Martiskaine (2016, 1), adopting a mixed methods approach, found that “community leadership can aid the development of grassroots innovations, which operate in niches and require nurturing”. Similarly, Uzoagu (2019), in a study on effective community leadership as means for promoting sustainable community development in Nigeria, concluded that leadership role is crucial for the development of communities. Also, Md Rami, Abdullah and Simin (2016, 47) carried out a study on the influence of leadership in rural community development in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia in which they posited that:

effective community leadership plays a significant role as an agent of change and has the ability to positively impact the development of rural community. Besides that, community leaders’ practice of effective leadership style is perceived to bring changes among the community in the social, economic and cultural aspects, as well as changes in the way of thinking among rural communities.

All of these studies and more have empirically established a positive association between leadership and community development. Recently, there is also empirical evidence to suggest that

ambidextrous leadership behaviour has positive association with several organizational outcomes which can translate to improved production. For instance, Babu, Prasad, and Prasad (2024) established that ambidextrous leadership positively and significantly impact innovative work behaviour and employee performance. Consequently, this study hypothesizes as that:

H1: Leaders’ closing behaviour is significantly associated with community development of emerging economies.

H2: Leaders’ opening behaviour is significantly associated with community development of emerging economies.

Leadership Ambidexterity and Organizational Performance

Cao, Gedajlovic and Zhang (2009) found both balance and combined dimensions of organizational ambidexterity were related to relative firm performance in 122 Chinese SMEs in the high-tech sector. Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) reported an association between organizational ambidexterity and perceived organizational performance by surveying 4,195 employees in 41 business units of 10 multinational firms. He and Wong (2004) found support for the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and firms’ sales growth in 206 manufacturing firms based in Singapore and Malaysia. Lubatkin, Simsek, Ling & Veiga (2006) found that organizational ambidexterity was positively related to subjective firm performance using a sample of 139 North American SMEs in different sectors. Patel et al. (2013) found a positive link between organizational ambidexterity and firm revenue growth in 215 US SMEs in the high-tech sector.

These results suggest that when organizations are ambidextrous, they are more capable of exploiting existing resources to align with current activities, and exploring new opportunities to quickly adapt to environmental changes. Organizations such as law firms tend to combine exploration, which creates new opportunities, with exploitation, in order to re-configure existing offerings, which helps them achieve flexibility in a dynamic environment (Swart & Kinnie, 2010). Organizational ambidexterity, therefore, enables the firm to develop different learning capabilities that can create strategic value (Kang & Snell, 2009; Lavie, Stettner & Tushman, 2010).

Anekwe, Ardi, and Nwatu (2020) study investigated the effect of ambidexterity on organizational performance of manufacturing firms, specifically

exploring the relationship between innovative ambidexterity and market share and the effect of contextual ambidexterity on competitive advantage. The dynamic capability theory propounded by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) was adopted. A correlation survey research design was utilized. The population of the study is 386. The sample size of 196 was ascertained using the Taro Yamane formula. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was employed to test the hypotheses. The study revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between innovative ambidexterity and market share (correlation coefficient = .914, N 189, $P < 0.01$). It was also found that there is a significant positive relationship between contextual ambidexterity and competitive advantage (correlation coefficient = .820, N 189, $P < 0.01$). The study concluded that an ambidextrous firm is capable of exploiting existing competencies as well as exploring new opportunities to enhance its performance and competitiveness. From the review, the study therefore hypothesizes that:

H3: Leaders' closing behaviour is significantly associated with organizational performance in emerging economies.

H4: Leaders' opening behaviour is significantly associated with organizational performance in emerging economies.

From the empirical review, it can be extrapolated that leadership ambidexterity will have a positive relationship with production in emerging economies. The hypotheses generated from the empirical review are justified by the outcomes of empirical studies that affirm the association between leadership ambidexterity and job outcomes. For instance, Slatten, Mutonyi, Nordli and Lien (2013) carried out a study on "the role of ambidextrous leadership and employee ambidexterity in enhancing service quality of care and creativity - a study of health professionals", and found that ambidextrous leadership and employee ambidexterity promote the job-directed performance of health professionals. Similarly, Slatten, Mutonyi, Gonzalez-Pinero, Slatten, and Lien (2024) undertook a study on "driving innovation in health care: exploring the impact of ambidextrous leadership on creative performance among frontline health professionals in Norway" and found that there is a positive link between ambidextrous leadership and health professionals' creative performance. Both studies focused on the health sector. However, other studies have been carried out in other sectors. For example, Hmedan (2023) carried out a study titled "the Impact of Ambidextrous Leadership on Firm Performance: An Empirical Analysis of Syrian SMEs" and found

a positive and significant relationship between ambidextrous leadership and firm performance, thus arguing that "business owners who effectively balance both exploratory and exploitative activities are better positioned to enhance their firms' performance" (Hmedan, 2023: 1).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to theoretically examine the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and production of emerging economies. The study identified leaders' closing and opening behaviours as the two manifest ways that leaders undertake exploitation and exploration towards supporting internal control, and initiating innovative change in the management of organizations. These behaviours are supported by the bonding and bridging social capital that promote both collaboration and competition at the same time in advancing the overall development of nations. By undertaking an empirical review on the relationship between leadership and community development, as well as leadership ambidexterity and organizational performance, the study concludes that ambidextrous leadership behaviour is a strong precursor to productive outcomes in emerging economies. Consequently, the study hypothesized that there is a significantly association between leaders' closing and opening behaviours with productive outcomes such as community development and organizational performance. The study therefore recommends that leaders should be ambidextrous by exploring internal resources and exploiting external possibilities in their effort to grow production and pursue the Sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The study is limited by the dearth of extant literature on empirical studies on the topic in Nigeria. The study therefore recommends that an empirical study be carried out to examine the nature and extent of the association between leaders' ambidextrous behaviour and productive outcomes in Nigeria.

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