

Democratic Leadership Style and Employee Engagement in Federal Ministries in Cross River State, Nigeria: A Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract

Employee engagement is an important organisational outcome because it reflects the extent to which employees invest energy, attention and commitment in their work. Leadership practices can influence the conditions under which such engagement develops. This paper examines the conceptual relationship between democratic leadership style and employee engagement in federal ministries in Cross River State, Nigeria. Democratic leadership is examined through four dimensions: participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice and collaborative leadership. The paper is anchored on Kahn's Theory of Personal Engagement and supported by Social Exchange Theory. The conceptual argument is that democratic leadership practices can create conditions that encourage employees to regard their contributions as meaningful, feel psychologically safe and develop stronger reciprocal relationships with their leaders. Nigerian evidence also indicates that leadership and employee voice are relevant to employee engagement. However, much of the available evidence has been generated outside federal ministries and outside Cross River State. The paper therefore provides a context-specific conceptual framework for understanding how democratic leadership may relate to employee engagement in the federal public service. It concludes that appropriate participatory and inclusive leadership practices may provide a useful avenue for strengthening employee engagement while maintaining formal public-service accountability.

Keywords: *Democratic leadership, employee engagement, participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice, collaborative leadership.*

Introduction

Leadership is a central element of organisational functioning because leaders influence employees' experiences, relationships and approaches to work. Democratic leadership is particularly concerned with participation, consultation, communication and shared responsibility. Rather than concentrating decision-making entirely in the hands of leaders, democratic leadership creates opportunities for employees to contribute ideas and participate in matters affecting their work. Employee engagement is similarly concerned with the quality of employees' involvement in their work. Kahn (1990) conceptualised personal engagement as the extent to which individuals bring their physical, cognitive and emotional selves into their work roles. He identified psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability as important conditions

associated with engagement. Schaufeli et al. (2006) subsequently conceptualised work engagement through vigour, dedication and absorption.

The connection between leadership and engagement has received considerable attention. Chan (2019), for example, found a positive relationship between participative leadership and work engagement. Busse and Regenberg (2019) also demonstrated the relevance of psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability in understanding the relationship between leadership inclusiveness and employee engagement. Evidence from Nigeria makes the issue particularly relevant. Amah (2018), studying organisations in Lagos, found that leadership styles were associated with employee engagement through boundary variables including employee voice and perceived organisational support. The study reported a positive relationship between employee voice and engagement. Amah (2023) also found that employee voice and trust in direct leadership were relevant to employee engagement among organisations in Lagos. Despite this literature, there is still a need to consider democratic leadership specifically within the Nigerian federal public-service context. Federal ministries operate within formal structures of authority, accountability and administrative procedures. The question is therefore how participatory leadership practices can coexist with these structures and potentially contribute to employee engagement. This paper addresses that issue by developing a conceptual perspective on democratic leadership and employee engagement in federal ministries in Cross River State. Employee engagement is important to organisational effectiveness, yet engagement does not develop independently of the organisational environment. Leadership behaviour can influence whether employees feel valued, involved and able to contribute to organisational activities. In public organisations, this issue can be particularly important because employees operate within formal hierarchies and established administrative procedures. While hierarchy is necessary for accountability, excessive concentration of decision-making may reduce opportunities for employees to contribute their knowledge and express their views.

Evidence from Nigeria supports the relevance of leadership and employee voice to engagement. Amah (2018) found that leadership styles did not have a simple direct relationship with employee engagement; instead, employee voice and perceived organisational support helped explain the relationship. This suggests that the way leaders create the workplace environment may be as important as the leadership style itself. The conceptual problem addressed by this paper is therefore the need to explain how specific democratic leadership practices—rather than democratic leadership as a broad label—may be associated with employee engagement. The paper focuses on participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice and collaborative leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Kahn's Theory of Personal Engagement

Kahn's (1990) Theory of Personal Engagement provides the primary theoretical foundation for this paper. Kahn argues that individuals become personally engaged when they are able to bring themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally into their work roles. The theory identifies three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, safety and availability. Democratic leadership can potentially support these conditions. Participative decision-making may increase meaningfulness by allowing employees to contribute to decisions. Employee voice may contribute to psychological safety where employees believe they can express their views without unreasonable negative consequences. Employee involvement and collaboration may provide social and organisational resources that support employees' ability to invest themselves in their work. The theory therefore

provides a useful explanation of why democratic leadership may be associated with employee engagement.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory provides a complementary explanation. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) explain that workplace relationships involve exchanges in which positive treatment may generate reciprocal responses. When leaders demonstrate respect, listen to employees and provide opportunities for participation, employees may respond with greater willingness to contribute to organisational objectives. Democratic leadership can therefore be viewed as creating positive exchanges between leaders and employees. Together, Kahn's theory and Social Exchange Theory provide both a psychological and relational explanation of the proposed relationship.

Democratic Leadership Style

Democratic leadership is an approach that encourages employees to participate in organisational decisions and activities. It emphasises consultation, communication and shared responsibility while retaining appropriate leadership authority. Democratic leadership is closely related to participative and inclusive leadership. Chan (2019) found that participative leadership was positively associated with work engagement, while Busse and Regenberg (2019) demonstrated the importance of leadership inclusiveness and psychological conditions in understanding employee engagement. For this paper, democratic leadership is conceptualised through four dimensions: participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice and collaborative leadership.

Participative Decision-Making and Employee Engagement

Participative decision-making refers to employees' opportunities to contribute ideas and opinions to decisions affecting their work. Participation may increase employees' sense of ownership because they become contributors rather than merely recipients of organisational decisions. It may also allow managers to benefit from employees' practical knowledge. This relationship is consistent with Kahn's concept of psychological meaningfulness. When employees perceive their contributions as important, they may develop stronger connections with their work. Evidence from Chan (2019) also supports a positive relationship between participative leadership and work engagement. Thus, participative decision-making provides a plausible conceptual pathway between democratic leadership and employee engagement.

Employee Involvement and Employee Engagement

Employee involvement refers to employees' participation in organisational activities, problem-solving and work-related decisions. Involvement can strengthen employees' sense of responsibility and belonging. When employees are given opportunities to contribute to organisational activities, they may perceive their roles as more meaningful. This argument is consistent with Kahn's theory and with the broader literature on inclusive leadership. It also fits Social Exchange Theory because employees may reciprocate organisational inclusion with greater willingness to contribute. Employee involvement is therefore conceptually expected to have a positive relationship with employee engagement.

Employee Voice and Employee Engagement

Employee voice refers to employees' expression of suggestions, opinions and concerns intended to improve organisational or individual outcomes. Employee voice is particularly important to democratic leadership because meaningful participation requires communication. Where employees believe that their views are valued, they may be more willing to contribute actively to their work. Nigerian evidence gives this dimension particular importance. Amah (2018) found that employee voice was positively related to employee engagement and argued that leadership behaviour can create an environment that either encourages or discourages voice. Amah (2023) also found employee voice to be relevant to employee engagement in Nigerian organisations. Employee voice therefore represents one of the strongest conceptual links between democratic leadership and engagement in the Nigerian context.

Collaborative Leadership and Employee Engagement

Collaborative leadership emphasises cooperation between leaders and employees in addressing organisational issues and achieving shared objectives. Collaboration can promote communication, knowledge-sharing and shared responsibility. It may also strengthen relationships between leaders and employees. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, constructive relationships can encourage reciprocal positive behaviour. Collaborative leadership may therefore contribute to employee engagement by creating stronger interpersonal connections and opportunities for collective contribution. In federal ministries, however, collaboration should operate within formal authority and accountability structures. Democratic leadership does not require the elimination of hierarchy; rather, it involves using authority in a way that permits appropriate employee participation.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement refers to the extent to which employees invest themselves in their work. Kahn (1990) provides the foundational conceptualisation of engagement, while Schaufeli et al. (2006) describe work engagement through vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour refers to energy and resilience at work. Dedication refers to enthusiasm, significance, pride and commitment toward one's work. Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and deeply involved in one's work. These dimensions provide a useful way of understanding the potential outcome of democratic leadership practices.

Research Gap

Existing literature establishes an important foundation for understanding leadership and employee engagement. However, three gaps remain relevant. First, much of the established leadership-engagement literature originates outside the Nigerian public-service context. Nigerian evidence does exist, including Amah's studies, but these studies were conducted primarily in organisations in Lagos rather than federal ministries in Cross River State. Second, democratic leadership is often treated as a broad construct. This paper provides greater conceptual specificity by examining four dimensions: participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice and collaborative leadership. Third, the institutional context matters. Public-sector organisations operate under administrative, political and accountability requirements that may differ from those of private organisations. Fletcher et al. (2020) similarly argued for greater attention to context in public-sector engagement research. The present paper therefore provides a focused conceptual framework that can guide future empirical research on federal ministries in Cross River State.

Conclusion

This paper examined the conceptual relationship between democratic leadership style and employee engagement in federal ministries in Cross River State, Nigeria. Democratic leadership was examined through participative decision-making, employee involvement, employee voice and collaborative leadership. The theoretical discussion suggests that democratic leadership can potentially create conditions associated with engagement. Kahn's Theory of Personal Engagement explains the importance of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability, while Social Exchange Theory explains the reciprocal relationships that may develop between leaders and employees. Existing Nigerian evidence, particularly concerning employee voice and leadership, further supports the relevance of examining these relationships within Nigeria. However, the specific context of federal ministries in Cross River State remains insufficiently explored. The paper therefore provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how democratic leadership may relate to employee engagement in this setting.

Recommendations

1. Managers of federal ministries should provide appropriate opportunities for employees to participate in decisions affecting their work.
2. Employees should be encouraged to contribute ideas and participate in organisational problem-solving.
3. Management should establish effective channels for employee voice and ensure that employees can express work-related concerns appropriately.
4. Managers should encourage collaboration among employees and departments while maintaining clear accountability.
5. Future researchers should empirically test the proposed framework within federal ministries in Cross River State.

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