

## **Developing Social Intelligence in Leadership: a Vehicle for Promoting Peaceful Leadership-Followership Interactions in Nigerian Universities**

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**Abstract:** The social intelligence/skills of the leadership of the university system and other organizations generally, is very critical to developing and maintaining a peaceful workplace relationship and enhancing leadership success. This work therefore, focused on developing social intelligence in leadership: A vehicle for promoting peaceful leadership-followership interactions in Nigerian universities. The work explored and extensively discussed the concept of social intelligence as perceived by different scholars. It also identified the characteristics of a socially intelligent leader/individual. Further highlighted and explicated were the different techniques/instruments that can be employed in measuring the social intelligence of a leader. Also examined herein were the strategies for developing and improving social intelligence in leadership as well as the importance of social intelligence in leadership. Finally, conclusion was also made.

**Keywords:** Social Intelligence, Leadership, Followership, Interaction and University

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a social process and a very complex task. Even though the nature of the university system is based on shared governance, the vice chancellor who occupies the central leadership of the university is duty bound towards ensuring that the system works efficiently and effectively. Besides the vice chancellor, heads of departments, deans of faculties, directors, registrars and other principal officers also carry out responsibilities as leaders in their various levels and capacities. According to Olofu and Olofu (2021), in directing the affairs of the university system, the social and behavioral versatility, sensitivity, flexibility and the ability of social understanding of the leaders/administrators is very important too. As such, a leader needs to develop and sustain a humane, peaceful and harmonious work environment as well as promote cordial relationship with his/her employees. Thus, a leader's ability to relate peacefully with workers is dependent on his/her social skills or what is generally referred to as social intelligence.

In the view of Mirfattah (2017), being a successful leader and having harmonious relationship with employees in an organization does not just occur but requires leadership efforts and social intelligence. Mirfattah further stressed that the leadership of some universities may often times focus their attention on getting workers complete their tasks within the stipulated deadlines but seem to do little or nothing as to encouraging employees to get connected to the organization and have employees share ideas together. The situation is even worsened when the leadership of the system is being managed by people who are not socially intelligent. Corroborating the above, Bhasin (2020) maintained that as every leader needs cognitive intelligence to make sound decisions and emotional intelligence to understand his/her feelings and those of the workers, so does every leader require social intelligence to connect and relate peacefully with his/her workers; thereby creating a work environment characterized by love, care and harmony. A good leader should possess the ability to read other people, know their feelings and communicate effectively with them. According to Akisan (2019), there is better synergy between a leader and his/her followers when there is harmonious and cordial relationship. It is therefore the responsibility of the leadership of every university to create a working atmosphere which is conducive for everyone and maintain cordial relationship with employees. A leader with high social skills increases the willingness of employees to collaborate better and work towards organizational effectiveness. Building self-social skills as a leader in the workplace goes a long way improving effective communication, understanding and collaboration between the leader and the employees. Ndifon, Edu and Olofu (2021) maintained that the social intelligence of a leader also helps in creating and fostering positive, respectful and supportive human relationships between management and employees; thereby enhancing productivity.

**Concept of Social Intelligence**

The concept of social intelligence is otherwise referred to as common sense or street smarts. Different scholars have defined social intelligence in different ways. Thorndike (1920) cited in Wikipedia (n.d.) defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage men and women and boys and girls, to act wisely in human relations." It is a person's ability to understand and manage interpersonal relationships. Folen (2010) cited in Ganaie and Mudasir (2015), perceived social intelligence as a person's competence to optimally understand one's environment and react appropriately for socially successful conduct. Thus, social intelligence hypothesis claims that the demands of living together is what drives our need for intelligence and it is an evolutionary adaptation for dealing with highly complex social situations as well as gaining and maintaining power in social groups.

Honeywill (2015) cited in Bhasin (2020) see social intelligence as an aggregated measure of self- and social-awareness, evolved social beliefs and attitudes, and a capacity and appetite to manage complex social change. It is the ability of one being able to make important social decisions. A leader with social intelligence knows when to talk or listen, what to say and what to do. A socially intelligent leader begins with being engaged and focused on his/her work. He/she likes being engaged in the job. He/she is usually observant; thereby trying notice who talks to whom, watches expressions on the faces of workers as well as senses the feelings in the atmosphere. According to Akisan (2019), leaders with social intelligence practices active listening, they pay attention to others' concerns, manage their emotions and those the workers, involve workers in certain decision making processes, assume the best in others, encourage others and praise workers.

Social intelligence in the view of Edward (2019) is the ability to successfully build relationships and navigate social environments. Edward argued that the social intelligence of a leader or an individual is far more important than his/her intelligent quotient; as building strong social relationships improves organizational productivity, creates a peaceful work environment and promotes healthy and strong interpersonal relationship in an organization. Strong relationships improve our immune system and help combat disease; as loneliness and weak relationships are one of the major sources of stress, health problems and depression. According to Goleman cited in Edward (2019) human beings are wired to connect. Goleman argued that humans have specific structures in their brains which optimize relationships. A spindle cell is the fastest acting neuron in human brain that guides his/her social decisions. Thus, social intelligence is the human capacity to use his/her brain to effectively navigate through complex emotional situations and negotiate different social relationships. It is an ability that helps a leader/individual adjusts to different working environments

Characteristically, a leader/an individual who is socially intelligent is sensitive to social environment, values being happy, strives to get the best from workers, gives attention to others, respect other people's objective opinions, invest in social relationship, promotes peace, has interest in both workers and organizational needs, always seek for feedback and has both self and social awareness (Eric's, 2018). In the same vein, Edward (2019) maintained that socially intelligent leaders are known for social awareness ability (knowing how to respond to others), primal empathy, (sensing other people's feelings easily), attunement (listening with full receptivity), empathic accuracy (understanding other people's thoughts and intentions), social cognition (understanding the social world and the working of a web of relationships), social facility (knowing how to have smooth, effective interactions), synchrony (interacting smoothly with others), self-presentation (knowing how communicate with others), influence (shaping the outcome of social interactions) and having concern (caring about others' needs).

### **Measurement of Social Intelligence in Leadership**

The most intriguing issue of social intelligence is how it can be measured. That is, how can the social intelligence of a leader or an administrator be ascertained and rated as being low or high? Social intelligence quotient (SQ) is a statistical abstraction which is similar to the standard score approach used in intelligent quotient (IQ) tests, with a mean of 100. A score of 140 and above is considered to be very high social intelligence. Unlike the standard IQ test, it is not a fixed model. It leans more toward Jean Piaget's theory that intelligence is not a fixed attribute, but a complex hierarchy of information-processing skills underlying an adaptive equilibrium between the individual and the environment. Therefore, an individual can change his/her SQ by altering their attitudes and behavior in response to their social environment (Wikipedia).

Different techniques/instruments have been developed over the years with a view to understanding and measuring the level of social intelligence (high/low) in leaders/individuals. A few of them have been highlighted and discussed herein.

i. **Self-Report:** It is one of the methods of measuring one's social intelligence. In this case, the leader is expected to assess his/her ability to relate with his/her followers and handle social issues. Grieve and Mahar (2018) stated that although self-report is easy to administer but the question is whether self-report social intelligence measure would better be interpreted in terms of social self-efficacy (that is, one's confidence in one's ability to deal with social information)? Therefore, Bhasin (2020) admitted that leaders or people with SQ of over 120 are considered socially skilled and may work exceptionally well with jobs that involve direct contact and communication with other people. However, leaders with low SQ are more suited to work with smaller groups or teams or independently because they may not have the required interpersonal communication and social skills for success with workers.

ii. **George Washington University Social Intelligence Test:** This was created in 1928 by Dr. Thelma Hunt (a psychologist from George Washington University). It was originally proposed as a measurement of a person's capacity to deal with people and social relationships. The test is designed to assess various social abilities which consisted of observing human behavior, social situation judgment, name and face memory and theory of mind from facial expressions. Thus, George Washington University Social Intelligence Test consists of five item scales measuring abilities such as observation of human behavior, recognition of the mental state of the speaker, memory for names and faces, judgment in social situations as well as having sense of humor skills (Soller, 2021).

iii. **Question and Answer Sessions:** These sessions or meeting organized in an organization in order to assess a leader/person's pragmatic abilities to test eligibility in certain special education courses. Questions are usually based on communication skills and fluency, interpersonal skills, ability to create sense of humor in workers, having care for workers etc (Honeywill, 2015 cited in Soller, 2021). According to Akisan (2019), question and answer session as a tool for measuring a leader's level of intelligence bothers on issues such as self-awareness, social sensitivity, the leader's attitudes to workers, communication skills, ability to build cordial relationship with others.

**iv. Six Factor Test of Social Intelligence:** This approach to measuring social intelligence was developed by Guilford in 1967. It is aimed at measuring different forms of cognition of behaviors in an individual (Daniel, Frank & Ebbert, 2016). The six factors designed to measure the cognition of behaviors in individuals are:

**a. Expression Grouping:** Participants are expected to find one facial expression out of four alternatives which best fit a group of three other facial expressions.

**b. Missing Pictures (Systems):** Participants are presented with a sequence of events, pictured in photographs, and have to complete the sequence by choosing the correct last photograph.

**c. Missing Cartoons (Systems):** Participants are required to fill-in a blank, in a sequence of cartoons, by selecting the correct cartoon out of four choice alternatives.

**d. Picture Exchange (Transformations):** This test is made up of sequence of photographs which are presented in order to tell a story. Participants are required to replace one marked photograph of this sequence, with one of four alternatives, in order to give the story a different meaning.

**e. Social Translations (Transformations):** This test is the only verbal social intelligence. In this test, participants are given verbal statements made by different pair of persons in a defined social relation. They are expected to choose a pair of people out of the three alternatives for whom the given statement has a different meaning.

**f. Cartoon Prediction (Implications):** In this kind of test, participants are required to select one cartoon out of three alternatives that most appropriately complete a cartoon series.

Strategies for Developing and Improving on Social Intelligence as a Leader

Practicing leaders and would-be leaders have the tendency to develop and improve on their social intelligence/ability. As put by Wikipedia (n.d.), “social intelligence develops from experience with people and learning from success and failures in social settings”. Thus, leaders can employ different strategies to develop their social skills or social intelligence.

**i. Practise listening actively to others:** One of the things a leader should adopt in a bid to becoming socially intelligent is to be an attentive listener. It is the process of paying full attention when another person speaks. The act of active listening promotes deeper connection and social awareness. By learning how to actively listen to others, a leader builds his/her communication skills. A good listener filters facts from people’s expressions. According to Sunday (2022), thinking about another's perspective is helpful but actively engaging with others on their thoughts through careful listening provides a leader with actionable information that can inform his/her social awareness and rational decisions. In the same vein, Edward (2019) stated that listening to employees with full receptivity as a leader gives one the ability to understand them more perfectly. Hence, Edward added that people like to be heard and allowing them to talk with minimal interruption makes employees/others see a leader as being caring, trustworthy and likeable.

**ii. Develop empathy:** Empathy is the ability to feel what others feel. Empathy refers to the act of stepping into someone else’s shoes and imagining how they might think or feel. When employees sense or notice the empathy of a leader, they connect with him/her better (Ndifon, Edu & Olofu, 2021). In the view of Nicole (2022), when a leader develops empathy, it allows him/her to understand other people and also helps him/her to become more tolerant and compassionate of people who might be different from the leader. Empathy also allows a leader to understand his/her followers; thereby work through individual differences and build meaningful relationships. Thus, when a leader with empathy finds his/her feeling extremely opinionated about one position, he/she would always need to reflect on what another person thinks.

**iii. Avoid correcting people in front of others:** It is important for every leader to be conscious of when to correct his/her subordinate. Mirfattah (2017) opined that correcting an employee in the public activates embarrassment, anger and may result in disrespect and fear for a leader. Nicole (2022) similarly maintained that when an employee provides the wrong information to others or the leader, the leader should not be quick to jump in and correct him/her. Even if the intentions of the leader are good, this kind of behavior can be embarrassing and irritating. Thus, it is best to avoid correcting people in front of a group.

**iv. Learn to accept criticism:** People with a high social intelligence can accept and embrace criticism. According to Michael (2017), the inability to take criticism often comes from a place of low self-esteem and self-worth. As a leader who wants to be socially intelligent or wants to improve on his/her social intelligence, he/she needs to be open to criticisms from workers. The leader should always ask him/herself if the criticism is meant to help him/her and try to see how he/she can take the feedback to better his/her leadership approach.

**v. Focus on being positive:** Being positive as a leader activates good efforts from both the leader and in turn helps the leader to instill positive mindedness in his/her followers. Edward (2019) observed that a leader with positive mindset encourages him/her to consciously focus on the good parts of his/her job. A leader who not being positive minded often struggles and tends to blame him/herself and others even when things are going on well. As such, to be positive minded, a leader should always try to challenge any form of negative thoughts when they arise. He/she should also

try to get feedback on his/her daily performance and that of the employees. Nicole (2022) stated that a leader who wants to focus on being positive should learn how to meditate. That is, refusing to focus too much on either the past or future. Meditation is a skill that can help a leader become more comfortable with the present moment. As a result, it can reduce feelings of stress, irritation and depression; of which can contribute to a negative mindset.

#### Importance of Social Intelligence in Leadership

Social intelligence plays very significant role in organizational and leadership effectiveness. A socially intelligent leader displays strong social competencies and behaviours that make employees feel valued, trusted and respected. Some of the benefits derivable from being socially intelligent as a leader/individual have been highlighted thus.

**a. It promotes understanding of others:** A leader who is socially intelligent can easily understand the feelings, thoughts and mindset of his/her team workers compared to his/her counterpart who is socially bankrupt. In the opinion of McMillan (2018), successful leadership and social intelligence are directly related. McMillan observed that a leader's social skill or intelligence helps him/her to be able to read into the thoughts and emotions of his/her employees. In the same vein, Michael (2017) posited that when a leader is vested with social intelligence, the person does not need to struggle in order to understand the nature and the behavioural tendencies of his/her followers; thereby enabling the leader to easily predict who they are, what they can do at any point in time.

**b. It enhances listening skill of a leader:** Socially intelligent leaders have the ability to listen very well before responding to issues. Nicole (2022) maintained that a leader who finds it difficult to listen to others can hardly learn from people and improve on his/her area of weaknesses. Hence, it is important for a leader to listen carefully to others and integrate the knowledge with his/hers. A socially intelligent leader avoids behaviors that bring out negative emotions in others such as always showing others how smart one is and sarcasm or putting others down. Socially intelligent leaders have the ability to know how to monitor their language in such a manner that it avoids any conflict in the minds of the listeners. They can identify words that might create misunderstanding and steer clear of these ambiguous words.

**c. Social inclusion in work environment:** A sociable leader carries his/her followers along and makes them feel sense of belonging. Michael (2017) admitted that social intelligence is one of the most important character strengths to determine the success of leaders because leading is social in nature. When employees feel excluded in a work environment, it triggers social pain (i.e. feelings of exclusion that activate the part of the human brain that feels physical pain). Hence, Olofu, Agbo and Ogodo (2005) stated that people feeling social pain either withdraw from a group or take action to sabotage it but people who feel included are more likely to experience positive emotions that energize them. Through his or her interactions with others, leaders must motivate people to give their best efforts and align their behavior with organizational goals. Michael also added that workers who feel connected are more likely to trust their leaders because such leaders understand them and feel as they do. Thus, it is important for leaders to be optimistic, confident, friendly and approachable.

d. It helps in building cordial relationship with others: Often times organizations record low productivity because workers use it to get back at bad leaders/management. According to Soller (2021), *when workers feel loved by their leaders, they are very much likely to be happy and productive; as a happy worker is often a productive worker*. Olofu and Oko (2020) *therefore, submitted that social intelligent skills help a leader to related and connect more peacefully, caringly and harmoniously with employees; thereby even making the leader a more happy, productive and fulfilled person*. As stated by Akisan (2019), there is better synergy between a leader and his/her followers when there is harmonious and cordial relationship. As such, Olofu, Idoho and Ojong (2023) posited that a leader's social intelligence increases the willingness of employees to collaborate better and work towards organizational effectiveness. The social intelligence of a leader also helps in creating and fostering positive, respectful and supportive human relationships between management and employees; thereby enhancing productivity. According to an online source (safety4sea.com), one of the most critical features to work on for successful leadership is for the leader to interact with his/her team workers and through his or her interactions with workers, leaders can motivate people to give their best efforts in order to align with the goals of an organization.

**e. It facilitates social sensitivity of a leader:** This is one of the major importance of social intelligence in leadership. A leader who has social intelligence remains very conscious and sensitive to everything that happens within and around him. Bhasin (2020) observed that social intelligence helps a leader to be socially and behaviorally versatile, flexible and possess the ability of social understanding. A leader with social intelligence is usually very good in using his/her eyes; as he/she takes the time to understand body language his/her workers; thereby altering their attitudes and behavior in response to his/her social environment. According to Olofu and Odey (2017), socially intelligent leaders always realize that certain words tend to intimidate and threaten people. They avoid the usage of such words, especially while sharing feedback on the people's performances.

**f. It guides a leader's expression:** Socially intelligent leaders have the ability to know how to monitor their expression/language in such a manner that it avoids any conflict in the minds of the listeners. Thus, social intelligence helps a leader to carefully identify words that might create misunderstanding and steer clear of these ambiguous words. Olofu and Ukpubre (2014) maintained that it makes a leader to also realize that certain words tend to intimidate and threaten employees and as such, try to avoid the usage of such words, especially while sharing feedback on the people's performances (www.tutorialpoint.com).

### **Conclusion**

The social skills of leaders remain very crucial in every organization (the university system inclusive) if leaders at all levels must record huge success. And in an organization where social relationship is valued and promoted by the leadership, social ties would be evident, workers' commitment, dedication and productivity would all be the end point. Therefore, leaders in both educational and non-educational work environments who develop and properly utilize social intelligence are very much likely to witness leadership effectiveness, organizational effectiveness, workers' efficiency and harmonious work environment.

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