



# Leadership as *engagement*, leadership as *system* *development*

## A contextualised Ghanaian study

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper uses data about the challenges and difficulties confronting organisations and leaders to advance a dualized meaning of corporate leadership in the context of a developing country. The purpose is to describe a leadership frame that is locally contextualised, thereby bringing conceptualisation and thought closer to action, reified reality and applicability.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research was designed as a series of three studies starting from an applied/interventionist standpoint. The first study used data from applied diagnostic interventions, the second used qualitative interviews and the third used open-ended questionnaires. Data were collected from 25 Ghanaian organisations and 29 corporate executives.

**Findings** – Drawing on a range of everyday issues such as poor attention to customers, pressure from stakeholders (such as political overlords) and leaders' "love" for perks, the paper develops a notion of leadership as "engagement" and as "system development".

**Research limitations/implications** – The data are exploratory and the sample size may be considered small.

**Originality/value** – The paper discusses implications for leadership research and leader development in a developing country like Ghana.

**Keywords** Leadership, Ghana

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Corporate leadership is an under-researched concept in African countries like Ghana. The role corporate leadership may play in leveraging the overall state of health (Pupilampu, 2005b) and functionality of organisations and national development aspirations has yet to receive consistent and mainstream empirical attention. Leadership and managerial research in Ghana by Analoui (1999), Pupilampu (2005a) and Hale and Fields (2007) and a few others go some way to address the paucity of empirical material. These studies, however, demonstrate a lack of consistency in and a lack of connection with the broader theoretical and conceptual discourse. They also do not surface grounded conceptualisations. The recent work of Bolden and Kirk (2009) identifies a number of gaps and possibilities for leadership research in Africa. They note that

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research within Africa may help provide useful insights into alternative, more constructionist and communally connected conceptualisations of leadership. They also assert that there is the need for attention to sense-making rhetorical dialogues through which a more grounded and applicable understanding of leaders and leadership can be unearthed to feed both theory and leader development. They end their paper by referring to Barker (1997, p. 17):

To conclude, we would like to echo Barker's (1997) argument that at the heart of leadership is an *engagement* (emphasis that of present author) with the [...] community in which leadership is situated [...] for developing the societies in which they operate.

Barker's (1997) paper starts on a rather provoking note with the title: "How can we train leaders if we do not know what leadership is?" This raises a number of questions. In a developing country like Ghana, what challenges and conceptualisations of leadership exist and how can we model the leadership concept to make it contextually applicable to corporate existence, leader development and, ultimately perhaps national progress? To address these issues and contribute a grounded and locally constructed scenario of leadership, this paper reports research into Ghanaian corporate leaders' sense of the challenges and difficulties confronting their organisations and the failings, foibles and conundrums of leaders in that context. The purpose of the paper is, therefore, to describe a leadership frame that is derived from everyday leadership issues and contextualised organisational problematics, thereby bringing conceptualisation and thought closer to action and applicability. The paper is situated within the larger call for the contextualisation of leadership. Drawing on the notion of leadership as an engagement process, this paper discusses a surfaced conceptualisation of leadership as a two-sided coin: one side dealing with leadership as *engagement* with community, stakeholders and localised issues of relevance; and the other side dealing with leadership as *system development*. The paper makes suggestions on possibilities for application and future research.

Given the numerous definitions and characterisations of leadership, this paper uses Nicholson's (2000, p. 98) definition which casts leadership roles as: "positions of highest authority within a social group". This characterisation is simple and perhaps not sufficiently embracing – and may be debated by those who wish to keep notions of "authority" distinct from "leadership" (Barker, 1997). However, this focuses our attention on the category of people in organisations that are the focus of this study. This is particularly so in the African setting where holders of high office are often perceived as exercising (or supposed to be exercising) leadership. These position holders are believed to provide the spearheading framework by which group action is galvanised towards task achievement (Steers *et al.*, 1996). Traditional African society does not appear to separate leadership from authority: be it leadership derived from wisdom, old age or derived from status and formal position (Gyekye, 2003; Sidani, 2008; van der Colff, 2003). This receives some empirical validation from Nienaber and Roodt (2008) who found that South African executives did not make much of the received distinction between management and leadership.

### Leadership literature

The leadership literature is vast (see Blunt and Jones, 1997; Dash, 2005; House *et al.*, 2004; Nienaber and Roodt, 2008 for relevant reviews). Kondo (2002) indicates that

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leadership is a much observed but little understood phenomenon with many definitions and perspectives. This is a sentiment echoed by Washbush (2005, p. 1078) who confesses that after some 30 years of persistence in the belief that “leadership can be defined, studied and understood” he is “coming to the conclusion that it cannot”. Earlier, Yoos (1984) queried the trends in leadership research, suggesting in a rather scathing and cynical manner (akin to the cathartic submissions of a monk about to lose his faith!) that the term “leadership” may be expunged from the behavioural science literature without losing anything of intellectual value. Pelligrini and Scandura (2008), note that leadership research has been plagued by the challenge of multiple definitions and perspectives from which the phenomenon may be studied. All of this suggests that it is perhaps time to accept that leadership is a social construction (Grint, 2005) which is best studied, understood and defined from the perspective of its context of occurrence. This underscores the contextualisation argument of researchers who have considered the leadership question from the African perspective.

#### *The growth of leadership theory*

Steers *et al.* (1996) provide a straightforward picture of the journey of leadership theory and research from the 1930s up to the mid-1990s. In recent times researchers have begun to focus on leaders and leadership processes within socially constructed, context specific milieus (Hanges *et al.*, 2000). This trend has led to the emergence of concepts such as ethical leadership (Rost, 1995; Price, 2000) stakeholder notions of leadership (Rost, 1991; Maak and Pless, 2006), paternalistic leadership (Pelligrini and Scandura, 2008), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Hale and Fields, 2007) and leadership in government organisations (Trottier *et al.*, 2008). Related to these more reified considerations of leadership have been the efforts by others such as Svensson and Wood (2006) at examining what contributes to and how leaders can remain effective within the organisational contexts in which their roles occur. They conclude that effectiveness varies across time and context. Svensson *et al.* (2008) develop a set of arguments which are at once both sceptical and supportive of the contribution of leadership to corporate progress. Their main contention appears to be that there are or may be some interaction between serendipity, sagacious capacity, time and context to produce artefacts of leader effectiveness. They, therefore, call for research that genuinely captures context, time, action and consequence as a way of calibrating the extent to which chance or determined leadership interventions produce the results which are realised. It is difficult to see how such research may proceed without cogent explications of context.

Bolden and Kirk (2009) categorise leadership theories and research into four broad streams. They identify essentialist theories (such as trait and behavioural approaches, which suggest that there is an objective verifiable set of capacities and functions of leadership), relational theories (such as leader-member exchange which deal with the exchanges between leaders and followers), critical theories (such as those questioning the very existence of the concept) and constructionist theories which draw in notions of leadership as a social construction or as a result of sense making and shared meanings.

#### *The gaps and the contextualisation argument*

Despite the volume of work, many writers agree that there are problems and gaps with the discourse. First, the literature is Western dominated, resulting sometimes in prescriptive suggestions as to the type of leadership needed in some parts of the world

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(Bass, 1994; Barker, 1997). Second, there are still rather intense debates about what leadership is, how to measure it, determinants of leader effectiveness, etc. with many arguing for leadership's centrality to organisational existence and others disputing it (Kelly, 2008; Meindl *et al.*, 1996; Nicholson, 2000, 2005; Washbush, 2005). This intense debate shows no sign of abatement. Third, there have been herculean efforts towards cross-cultural investigations of leadership – typified by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Programme study (Brodbeck and Frese, 2000; House *et al.*, 2004). These efforts have, however, not been context grounded since they have utilized extant – typically – Western frames to assess leadership and its features. Fourth, there is an increasing call towards contextualizing and localizing leadership (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Magner, 2008). Brodbeck and Frese (2000, p. 1), for example, have stressed the view that “leadership concepts are culturally endorsed”. In this regard, a troubling fifth gap – which motivates this paper – is the paucity of literature on issues and nuances of corporate leadership in Africa. This is troubling since many writers have raised concerns about the dearth of constructive leadership examples on the continent, as well as its many economic and organisational challenges (Beraho, 1997; Kumssa and Mbeche, 2004; Luiz, 2006). Indeed, the dearth of leadership research and theorizing has prompted a leading journal to issue a special call for papers on African Leadership and Management (*Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology*, 2009 June, p. 464) with the following expressed concern:

[...] although we are aware of some very positive cases of leadership and management emerging on the African continent, very little empirical or theoretical work has addressed leadership and management in Africa [...] the purpose of this special issue is [...] to advance a science of leadership and management in the African context [...].

Social scientists have a responsibility to examine phenomena, systematize what we find, generate and assist the world to use such knowledge. One of the tensions that may perhaps be ever present at the heels of leadership theorising and research is the drive for universalisation of concepts and principles that are thought to be core. This may be a worthy pursuit. However, the concept “*leadership*” with its associated principles appear to be eluding efforts at universalism. Tsui *et al.* (2007), in a review of organisational behaviour research, noted that only aspects of perceived charismatic and transformational leadership appear to have universal appeal. They also found little unanimity on notions of leadership behaviours. Concluding their review, they make seven major recommendations to guide research. One of their recommendations is captured simply as: “Go native – toward country-specific research” (p. 467). This is a relevant and most astute insight. They draw on Ofori-Dankwa and Ricks (2000) who suggest that international research may often not be asking the right questions. The way forward then, involves the execution of more country-specific empirical research which, by extension, should provide social science with a rich base for comparative analyses. Bolden and Kirk (2009), in setting the scene for their paper on leadership in Africa, point out that the current comparative approaches (which start from extant frames) may inadvertently continue to foist Western models on African situations and downplay the import of contextual and cultural variables. Noting the efforts of researchers on the GLOBE project as well as the writings of others like Harvey (2002), Bolden and Kirk decry the apparent negative connotations given to African leadership and the failure to mine the felt realities of the continent. They, therefore, join the call for more grounded and context-rich articulation of leadership with all the tensions, antagonisms and

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inherent contradictions of the African scene (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Denton and Vloeberghs, 2003; Luthans *et al.*, 2004; Magner, 2008; Nienaber and Roodt, 2008; Shahin and Wright, 2004; Sidani, 2008). This paper reports research which contributes to the contextualisation discourse.

*What do we mean by “context”?* Reber (1987, p. 153) defines a context as: “those events and processes (physical and mental) that characterise a particular situation and have impact on an individual’s behaviour (covert and overt)” or “the specific circumstances within which an action or event takes place”. Extended, contextualisation holds that behaviour must be analysed within its context of occurrence. In this regard, the organisational setting offers a first level for defining any context for leadership understanding. The national situation (economic, political, social), the times or epoch, as well as the business or institutional environment present further contextual possibilities that may influence leaders, the leadership process and organisational fortunes (Analoui, 1999). Context may also be proximate or distal. As Ofori-Dankwa and Julian (2005, p. 1309) note “Context factors are exogenous [...] and relate to variables in the external environment [...]”. Contextual variables may influence behaviour and processes through a variety of mechanisms such as socialization, sense-making and meaning formation, normative pressures, constraints on possible options and through the vast array of possibilities that have come to be understood as “culture”. A brief discourse on the African and Ghanaian contexts is, therefore, in order at this point.

### **The African conundrum and leadership research in Africa**

Recently (July 2009), US President Barack Obama declared to the Ghanaian Parliament that “Africa does not need strong leaders, it needs strong institutions”. While there must be a measure of truth in the statement, it may also be said that Africa’s perennial inability to build strong institutions, eradicate poverty, banish war and disease is, perhaps, related to a lack of leaders who see such institution building as key. This is the thesis behind Agulanna’s (2006, p. 256) position that “the major factor hindering the emergence of a strong, viable and enduring political democracy in Africa is that of the absence of a responsive and responsible political leadership”. Luiz (2006) paints a rather dismal picture of the marginalisation from which Africa suffers: economic, socio-political, institutional, technological and intellectual. Against this backdrop, the question that involuntarily leaps forward is: what is to be done? Luiz both poses and attempts to answer the question, suggesting the need for responsibility-taking and internal attention to institutions and governance. In this regard, Kiggundu *et al.* (1983, p. 66) argue that 70 per cent of the world’s populations live in poor countries such as those in Africa, therefore “what managers and administrators do or fail to do is of great significance”.

The difficulty, however, is that as Nkomo and Cook (2006) posit the current mainstream leadership literatures are perhaps ill-equipped to assist in dealing with the leadership, managerial and administrative issues that confront Africa’s organisations and politics. While Rotberg (2003) suggests that Africa has been a poor leadership incubator, Denton and Vloeberghs (2003, p. 93) note that corporate leaders in South Africa, for example, need to engage in a paradigm shift, but face a “mental block” due to the lack of “blueprints for the future”. The current range of potential blueprints is foreign, while the presenting situation is local. The leadership maps are from Western corporate landscapes and schools of thought, while the actual journeys

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are traversed on African soil. There are insufficient locally relevant models in the literature on which today's African corporate leaders may draw for building tomorrow's organisations. Organisational leaders on the continent contend with a multiplicity of challenges and realities, which include socioeconomic underdevelopment, coerced modernity and communities ravished by the effects of behavioural poverty (Munene *et al.*, 2005). Corporate leaders are confronted with having to satisfy a multiplicity of stakeholders – some with demands that may conflict with or may be potentially damaging for corporate progress. The vivid realities include political histories of patronage and self-aggrandisement which create a need for business leaders to tread warily between placating politicians, securing business and sometimes, staying alive (Afro-centric Alliance, 2001; Munene *et al.*, 2005; Nkomo and Cook, 2006). Perhaps, these problems are not unique to Africa and its many countries and cultures, but they certainly represent the issues confronting organisations on the continent and the context within which leadership discourse and practice takes place. These matters are, therefore, at the heart of any effort to contextualise corporate leadership.

The limited research on corporate leadership in Africa is characterised by a number of strands and concerns. These may be summarised as: limited theory testing and research which sees management and leadership as intertwined and inseparable (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Puplampu, 2005a; Hale and Fields, 2007) efforts at explicating the historical/cultural impact on leadership (Beraho, 1997; Sidani, 2008; Shahin and Wright, 2004), deep concerns for greater attention to context (Magner, 2008; Theimann *et al.*, 2006), concern for leadership development (Luthans *et al.*, 2004; Magner, 2008; von Krosigk, 2007) and efforts at grounded research (Denton and Vloeberghs, 2003; van der Colff, 2003). As Nkomo and Cook note, the picture is at best inconclusive. At the present time, we do not know enough (from the empirical standpoint) about the perceived or real challenges of corporate leaders in Africa; we do not know enough about the mechanisms of leadership navigation of the simultaneous traditional and modern situations in which many African organisations operate; we do not know enough about how organisations and institutions in Africa are led. If leadership is derived and endorsed from its context, then it is necessary for researchers to mine its locally derived dialectics (Collinson, 2005) and conceptualizations. It seems – at the present time at least – the case for contextualisation is an unassailable one which has been clearly made by scholars. The job at hand, therefore, is to generate local data from which relevant models may be drawn.

#### *Ghana (and corporate Ghana)*

Ghana is a West African developing country of 23 million people. It gained independence from the British in 1957, after almost 100 years of British colonial rule. The capital city is Accra, with a population estimated at about three million; it runs a constitutional democracy and is touted as one of the most stable in Africa. A number of indices provide a measure of Ghana's standing in the world. In 2006/2007, it received favourable credit ratings from Standard and Poors as well as Fitch. According to the 2009 Failed States Index, Ghana is the least failed state in Africa. It is seventh out of 48 on the 2008 Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance ([www.moibrahimfoundation.org](http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org); August 2009). It has a corruption index of 69th out of 179 countries and is 135th of 177 countries on the Human Development Index (Human Development Report, 2006). Foreign direct investment averages US\$500 m a year by 2006/2007 figures accounting for between

1 and 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). The working population numbers approximately 11.5 m with Agricultural pursuits taking over 60 per cent of this number and contributing 37 per cent of GDP. The strength or level of investor confidence in the economy is perhaps measured by the oversubscribed Sovereign Eurobond issued by the country in Western markets in 2007 – which raised US\$750 m. The economy has grown by about 6 per cent per annum over the last five years ([www.ghana.gov.gh](http://www.ghana.gov.gh); August 2009). The institutional environment is mixed. There are several multinational firms such as Newmont, AngloGoldAshanti, Coca Cola, Standard Chartered Bank, Unilver and Cargill. There are many well-respected local firms such as Databank Financial Services ([www.databankgroup.com](http://www.databankgroup.com)), Kasapreko Distilleries and UT Financial Services. The country's post-independence experiment with state-owned enterprises (SOEs) went disastrously wrong with over 300 SOEs moribund by the early 1980s. Most have now been sold off as part of a comprehensive divestiture programme. Researchers such as Analoui (1999), Kuada (1994) and Pupilampu (2005b, 2007) have noted that there are serious challenges with work ethics and institutional growth and functionality. These notwithstanding, Ghana as a nation is making strenuous efforts at democratic governance, public sector and policy reforms, economic management and private sector led growth (Owusu, 2006). In 2008, the UK giant Vodafone entered the Ghanaian market with the acquisition of the state telecoms firm "Ghana Telecom" for an estimated US\$900 m.

Ghana has a Club 100 list inceptioned in 1997 as an initiative of the Ghana Investment Promotion Council ([www.gipcghana.com](http://www.gipcghana.com)). Entry criteria include size (absolute turnover), growth (percentage of growth in turnover) and profitability (return on equity). These measures take 65 per cent of an applicant company's scores. The remaining 35 per cent are earned through a peer review process that rates on corporate social responsibility initiatives, compliance with filing of returns or audited accounts for preceding three years, good standing with statutory agencies such as Value Added Tax and Internal Revenue Service as well as strategic plans and management profile. At the present time (2009) about 50 per cent of the companies on the list are local firms. There are also a few industry and corporate excellence awards such as banking, marketing, most respected chief executive officer (CEO), etc. These awards have been keenly contested and anecdotal evidence suggests that many firms work hard to enter the rankings. There is an active stock exchange but with only 35 listed firms ([www.gse.com.gh/](http://www.gse.com.gh/)) and a market capitalization of about GH¢14.8 b or US\$10 b. Ghana has a large public sector. The state is by far the largest formal employer with about 500,000 employed across education, health, SOEs, municipal and local authorities, core civil services. The challenges of the public sector, for example, led to the creation in 2003 of a Ministry for Public Sector Reform which aimed to drive home a more responsive public sector, using performance contracts and service charters amongst other initiatives (Aryeetey and Kanbur, 2008).

Resorting to Hofstede's often quoted and perhaps overused categorisations, Ghana is within the West African norms of high power distance, low individuality, moderate to high uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and low long orientation scores ([www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_west\\_africa.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_west_africa.shtml); August 2009). Gyekye (2003) suggests that much of Africa is confronted with the tension of modernity and tradition. This tension is still evident in Ghanaian organisations (Kuada and Thomsen, 2005). Aryee (2004) notes that cultural values around family, community, hierarchy and social relationships have informed human resource management practice in Ghana. Management practices have

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been generally influenced by Ghana's colonial past, chequered economic and political history as well as patronage and rent seeking propensities. The present study is set within this mixed bag of national and organisational realities.

### *Research objective*

The purpose of the paper is, to describe a leadership frame that is derived from everyday leadership issues and contextualised organisational problematics, thereby bringing conceptualisation and thought closer to action and applicability. This is achieved by:

- using organisational and leadership problematics and conundrums to describe the context in which corporate leaders function in Ghana;
- using these surfaced descriptions and context to model how leadership may be expected to operate in a place like Ghana; and
- based on the contextual descriptions and model, the paper draws out some implications for leadership thinking and practice.

It must be stressed that, researchers who advocate contextualisation are not necessarily suggesting that all such research should/would necessarily conclude frames that are distinct and different from the extant. Rather, the suggestion is that such research offers some local insight. Such insight may then, in the best traditions of inductive enquiry, facilitate the making of more general statements – where particularistic evidence contains clear commonalities.

### **Design and methods**

This study adopted a three-stage exploratory design. Each stage involved the execution of one study. The first study was interventionist. The second was non-interventionist, using open-ended interviews and built on the first. The third was non-interventionist, used a short open-ended questionnaire. All data were gathered in English; participants were sampled based on their holding senior positions within their organisations. The essential hermeneutic of this design is that leadership issues are contextualised and located in and around organisations and, therefore, need to be studied *in situ*.

A number of researchers and scholars have raised issue with the dominant positivist traditions of and approaches to organisational and management research, arguing that much as these traditions have enabled us to build a worthy and respectable body of knowledge, the result has been a certain amount of dislocation between research and practice, theory and application (Paterson, 2001; Anderson *et al.*, 2001; van Dam and van de Berg, 2004). None of these scholars are advocating that researchers abandon rigour, objectivity and theoretical soundness. Rather, they are calling for the broadening of the agenda, the integration of context and practice into the business of knowledge generation and a constructive and intelligent departure from orthodoxy to the use of a variety of methods and approaches which should only serve to enhance knowledge, its relevance and application. In this regard, Pupilampu (2005b) used context rich applied data to formulate a model of corporate health and ill-health within an African context and Bolden and Kirk (2009) used data drawn from a series of training interventions backed up by depth interviews to explore leadership notions in Africa. Both approaches appeared to have yielded some value. The present work, therefore, draws on these approaches.

The first study being interventionist offered the opportunity to access directly, leadership issues within organisations which were having a variety of challenges.



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This enabled the research to achieve a greater understanding of leaders, leadership and the institutional environment. As noted by Bolden and Kirk (2009, p. 5): “more attention could be given to illuminating the rich fabric of influences that shape leadership experiences in an endeavour to enhance understanding”. Such research, however, faces the challenge of difficulties with generalization – given that interventions are often problem-based and solution-oriented, with solutions being typically locally applicable. The themes which were surfaced from the interventionist Study 1 provided the seeds for Study 2. Study 3 served to check on the viability of the emerging findings from Studies 1 and 2. This approach is similar, in a way, to the Bolden and Kirk research process which had six data components, including follow-up interviews and community visits after the initial training interventions. Each study is further explained below.

#### *Study 1 – organisational reviews*

In study 1, organisational analyses and diagnostic reviews were carried out on 13 organisations. A diagnostic review is a critical examination of the state of an organisation, often with a view to prescribing some form of intervention. It is a methodology which arises from organisational analysis. It takes and examines the state of an organisation from a number of perspectives, including political, cultural, structural, business process, etc. (Willcocks, 1994; Haque and Pawar, 2003). In Study 1, the research was attempting to unearth the following: the difficulties and problems besetting the organisations and the role of leader/ship in resolving same; the functional state of the organisations and the contextual problems underlying the current state. Information for this first study was gathered from a variety of sources including: document reviews, attendance at management meetings, interviews with staff and organisational leaders. The data from Study 1 are summarized as the observations and reflections of the researcher.

#### *Study 2 – open-ended interviews*

Study 2 used open-ended interviews of top executives of the organisations sampled in Study 1. For each organisation, the CEO, managing director and/or the director of human resources/administration were targeted. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were all held in the offices of the target officials. A total of 17 respondents were interviewed. The organisations were, at the time of the interviews, all based in Accra, Ghana’s capital city. Although the interviews were open-ended, they were focused around three main questions:

- Q1. What are/is your greatest difficulty/challenge(s) as leader/s?
- Q2. Considering the matter of leadership, how would you explain some of the corporate failures and poor organisational performance in Ghana?
- Q3. What do corporate leaders need to understand in this (Ghanaian) environment?

#### *Study 3 – open-ended questionnaire*

Study 3 used a simple four-item open-ended questionnaire where respondents were invited to write out their views on:

- Q1. The internal and external structures or frameworks within which corporate leaders function.

- Q2. The processes by which leaders enact their roles.
- Q3. Challenges that the leaders think they have or are facing.
- Q4. Preparing the next generation of leaders.

A total of 12 corporate leaders were sampled from 12 organisations (different from those targeted in Studies 1 and 2). Table I summarises the design and describes the respondent and organisational sample for all three studies.

### Results of the study

The results are presented for each study and are categorized separately under public/non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector organisations and private sector organisations. The study did not set out to assess the differences between public and private sectors on leadership issues. This sector-based categorization is therefore largely for reporting purposes only. The analyses draw on the entire range of findings as derived from a Ghanaian context.

#### *Results from Study 1*

The data presented here are observations of the researcher from the diagnostic reviews of the 13 organisations sampled. The data are summarized separately for the public/NGO and private sectors.

##### *Public and NGO sector organisations*

- (a) Neglect of the service provider culture: the service provider culture is not dominant; services are subject to bureaucratic bottlenecks, which supervisors and leaders seem unable to resolve.
- (b) Heads of units and managers do not see themselves as being in charge, despite their job titles such as “manager” or “head” they appear to feel that they have no capacity or motive to change things. They see “action” and “initiative” as emanating only from “above”.
- (c) Fear of political powers: institutional position holders appear mortified by the range of potential repercussions that political office holders (such as Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament) could visit on them; this is perhaps not surprising as between 1982 and 1998, Ghana experienced significant social upheavals which included a certain victimization for speaking one’s mind; there was for a time, a “proceed on leave” culture where public officials were summarily dismissed or asked to proceed on their annual vacation – often such instructions were issued via public radio and/or meant the official may well consider themselves removed from the position.
- (d) Ability to preside over corporate failure without a corresponding sense of responsibility. Some position holders have not been able to confront their supervising bodies (boards, oversight government departments, etc.) with the realities “on-ground”. Status reports of the state of the organisations were, in some cases, not prepared. In other cases the report contents were at variance with the available evidence on the state of the organisation.
- (e) Weaknesses in adherence to procedural mechanisms and tendency to circumvent laid down procedure; in some cases procedure manuals were ill/underdeveloped

**Table I.**  
Summary of research design and sample characteristics

Design	The three different studies		
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Approach	Interventionist Reviews and diagnostics of organisations during applied interventions	Empirical Open-ended interviews	Empirical Open-ended questionnaires
Description of organisational sample	Organisations in Accra, Ghana <i>n</i> = 13 2 Private large multinational 3 Private, banking 4 Public large 1 Private large Ghanaian owned firm 1 SME 1 NGO	Organisations in Accra, Ghana <i>n</i> = 17 Male = 13 Female = 4 6 CEOs 1 HR director 5 Senior managers 4 Directors of administration 1 Executive director	Organisations in Accra <i>n</i> = 12 4 Public large 4 Private large Ghanaian owned firms 4 NGO
Description of respondent sample	Organisational leaders, managers, general employees; document reviews Sample sizes varied but generally followed a norm of 25 per cent of staff; 25 per cent of management	Challenges of leadership; corporate failures in the context of leadership; what corporate leaders need to understand about the Ghanaian business environment	Structures within which leaders operate; processes engaged in by leaders; challenges of leadership; dealing with succession
Data foci	Organisational and leadership difficulties which necessitated organisational interventions	Data are presented as summary bullets and verbatim quotes from respondents	Data are presented as summary of respondent views
Type of data and presentation	Data are presented as the researcher's observations and reflections on the issues identified through the reviews		

**Notes:** Across all three studies: organisational *n* = 25; respondent *n* = 29

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or non-existent. This was evident in the NGO as well as some of the public sector organisations.

*Private sector organisations*

- (a) Failure to ensure corporate relevance and leader self-renewal: leaders seemed to have difficulty examining and reflecting on their own work and approaches thus apparently creating a corresponding unwillingness for similar reflection within the rest of the organisation.
- (b) Managerial buck-passing and excuse-giving: the range of excuses articulated by managers for non-action or failure to task-execute include: “resource constraints”; “procedural bottlenecks”; “system inadequacies”; “lack of personnel”; “remit or authority limitations”; and “inconsiderate superiors”.
- (c) Problems of succession: difficulties in finding talent to groom and a lack of appropriate systems for, or leader unwillingness to groom successors.
- (d) Failure to develop corporate systems (managerial/leader unwillingness or inability to create or develop systems) which would enable the organisation to function without the leaders’ regular direct personal intervention.

These findings which speak to the current state and problems of the organisations and their leaders may be grouped under four main headings:

- (1) need to pay attention to customers or clients (list “a” above);
- (2) dealing with sub-leader weaknesses (lists “b”, “g” and “h” above);
- (3) addressing or engaging with personal capacity, self-awareness and ethics (lists “c”, “d” and “f” above); and
- (4) need to pay attention to organisational structures and procedures (lists “e” and “i” above).

These findings provide a sense of the context, situation and challenges of the organisations and leaders sampled. Two themes surface: first, connecting with oneself and with ones’ constituents and second, building systems. These interpretations therefore informed Study 2.

*Results from Study 2*

In Study 2, three main questions (noted above) were used to drive the data effort. The findings are presented below as summaries of interview data. Verbatim quotes are used where such quotes capture the sentiments expressed. Themes or clusters were drawn up from the summaries, using four tools: consistent mention of issues by respondents; clustering of issues around a common idea; a cluster’s interpretation in relation to the study questions and each emergent theme’s distinctiveness from others. In order to assist in the appreciation of the data and the reader’s validation of the emergent themes, the full set of summaries is presented below.

*Q1. On the greatest difficulties/challenges as a leader*  
*Public/NGO*

- (i) Having to deal with subordinates who do not appreciate the vision and direction.

- (ii) Problems with sub-managers for whom fraternizing with workers seem more important than ensuring performance and work.
- (iii) “Sometimes feel hands are tied behind your back (e.g. cannot fire certain people), yet expected to deliver”.

*Public/private/NGO*

- (iv) Weak managerial capacity. Analytical thinking of some people in leadership seems rather poor. “Wonder what their education was all about”.
- (v) “My managers and some senior directors like to give excuses”. One can hardly get much done without having to fight a war with reasons why “it cannot be done” and why “it has not been done”.
- (vi) “Worker agitations which I deem unreasonable”.

*Private*

- (vii) “Getting staff to keep pace with me. Frustrating. Want to run. But must walk”.
- (viii) “Getting my people to truly see our clients as the real breadbasket”.
- (ix) “Overloaded. Difficult to trust next line with delivery in some instances, so I have to do it all myself”.

*Q2. On corporate failures and poor organisational performance*

*Public*

- (i) History of political interference in the internal affairs of public sector organisations.
- (ii) Cronyism, nepotism and favouritism flourishing because of weak systems and procedures.
- (iii) “Some people should really not be in charge of their organisations. They simply do not have the ability” (getting things done, identify the issues, act and demand action and stay the course).
- (iv) “Many do not learn and are politically inept”.

*Public/private/NGO*

- (v) Endemic weak appreciation of customer service requirements – these are not demanded at/by the higher levels of management.
- (vi) Many have no agenda, have no sense of the issues and do not have a plan.
- (vii) “Proud CEOs! They enjoy their cars! And don’t mind if the organisation is not doing well”.

*Private*

- (viii) Organisations are operating in a difficult economic climate.
- (ix) There are many despotic CEOs and managers who circumvent procedure.

*Q3. On what corporate leaders need to understand*

*Public*

- (i) Must have the courage of their convictions and be prepared to resign if they have fundamental disagreements with their principals, boards or the government.
- (ii) “You can only do so much – limited life and limited tenure”.

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*Public/private/NGO*

- (iii) Introspection and “brutal” self evaluation are critical.
- (iv) “Sense of one’s self – it’s a lonely job, so who are you/am I?”
- (v) Leaders should discuss and articulate what performance really means for their organisations.
- (vi) Need to create systems on which the organisation runs.
- (vii) Ethical behaviour should be seen as mandatory.
- (viii) They are there to serve a certain purpose, not their own ends.

*Private*

- (ix) “You have a boss. You may be a boss, but you also have a boss”. “Sometimes this reality is lost on corporate executives”. “We have shareholders and stockholders. We have a fiduciary responsibility”.
- (x) How to negotiate the difficult terrain between boards and workers.

*Thematic analyses*

Table II shows the above data analysed to create thematic clusters. Six key themes emerge as critical considerations in the leadership conundrums under investigation in Ghana. These are: follower; sub-leader; client/customer; stakeholder; self-awareness and organisational systems/procedures themes.

*Results from Study 3*

Study 3 was informed by the thematic findings from Studies 1 and 2. The questions asked, therefore, sought to examine issues around structures, succession and how the leadership role is operationalised. Results are detailed below in the form of summary responses to each question:

- Q1. Do you have structures governing how you – as leader – operate in your organisation? What form/s do these structures take?

*Public/private/NGO.* There are organisational charts, which spell out the responsibilities and authorities; there are standard procedures/schedules, which are followed; boards prescribe authority schedules; the laws (act/s), which set the organisation up provide some framework for leaders’ operations.

*Private/NGO.* The environment is too turbulent for established structures; decisions and systems are created as and when needed.

These are interpreted by the researcher as a mixed recognition of the importance of systems and structures:

- Q2. How do you go about executing your leadership role?

*Public/private/NGO.* Involve and talk with employees; use the established rules and regulations (authority schedules and standard operating procedures); liaise with superiors, principals and boards, etc.; hire and fire; use decision and communication mechanisms such as meetings and memos.

These are interpreted by the researcher as recognition of the importance of systems and structures:

**Table II.**  
Thematic analyses  
of interview data  
from Study 2

Findings	Thematic clusters or dimensions	Interpretations
Q1i, vi, vii Q1ii, iii, iv, ix	Followee dimension Sub-leader dimension	The issues raised here suggest that the respondents in examining the challenges they face (Q1), seem to place great score on the behaviour and capacity of followers. It also seems they acknowledge that a key issue is to how the leader engages and secures follower consent, compliance and task execution. A related issue is that of leadership at the next level – the leader's link with his/her immediate subordinates (or next line of leadership) and the capacity of these immediate subordinates to execute in support of the leader. We interpret these as referring to the need to <i>engage</i> or need for an <i>engagement with or tackling</i> of these issues
Q1viii, Q2iv	Attention to customers or clients	Another challenge area is that of relating to clients. Here it seems the respondents recognise a lapse on the part of both lower level employees as well as managerial leadership in demanding and framing systems for employee attention to clients and customers. This, however, receives only two items or mentions. Again we suggest these refer or call for an <i>engagement</i> process
Q1v, Q2i, ii, Q3i, iii, vii	Dealing with stakeholders	When considering what leaders ought to understand (Q3) and why organisations fail (Q2), five issues are raised which suggest a stakeholder dimension in the leader's work; these relate to the interests the leader serves in his/role as leader. It is perhaps not only a matter of interests served but also an appreciation of the concerns of those interests and the capacity of the leader to negotiate those interests. We interpret these as referring to the need to <i>engage</i> or need for an <i>engagement with or tackling</i> of these issues
Q2iii, v, viii, ix Q3ii, iv, v, viii, x	Self-awareness dimension	The self-awareness theme, interestingly receives the highest number of issues/mentions. The need for self-awareness, self-examination and internally generated sense of responsibility comes across as critical in the leader's repertoire of behaviours and processes. Again we interpret these to mean a call for an <i>engagement with self</i>
Q2vi, vii, ix, Q3vi, ix	Organisational systems and procedures	The organisational dimension suggests that the leader has to have an eye for the interests and internal workings of the organisation and needs to facilitate the development of organisational systems and procedures. We interpret these to represent a call for the <i>development of systems</i> and frameworks and structures

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Q3. Do you think you have major challenges in your role? What forms do these challenges take?

*Public/private.* Making the organisational structure and related systems work; dealing with boards, which often want to get involved in the running of the organisation; resource management in a difficult economic climate; lack of employee buy-in and managing the political dimensions of corporate leadership in Ghana: many things have political connotations or undercurrents.

These are interpreted by the researcher as recognition of the importance of systems and structures and an admittance of the political dimension of corporate leadership:

Q4. Do you have a succession plan?

*Public/NGO.* No. Succession plans not often in place. May lead to internal clashes and “chosen” people “feeling too big”; not really necessary; problem of next line of management behaving poorly and not being task conscious; use of open adverts – qualified people are free to apply; difficulty of identifying capacity; prefer to source from outside the organisation.

*Private.* Yes, use of formal plans based on managerial capacity and demonstrated competence; use the promotion system to line up next possible leader/s; use of open adverts – qualified people are free to apply.

These are interpreted by the researcher as recognition of the importance of systems and structures and an acknowledgement of the political dimension of corporate leadership.

## Findings

This research examined leadership with the aim of describing a leadership frame that is locally contextualised. We now examine the findings.

### *A description of the context of corporate leadership in Ghana*

The leadership process in Ghana seems to be set within a mixed corporate and national environment. While there are many competitive pressures on organisations, there are also many political and social constraints. Leaders also have to contend with internal organisational challenges from weak sub-leaders and interfering boards of directors. There is also the perception that corporate leaders themselves are wary of the capacity and ability of their fellow leaders, with some raising doubts about whether fellow leaders merit the roles they occupy. Study 1 identified four issues and challenges facing corporate leadership in Ghana across both private and public sectors. These are: attention to service delivery, sub-leader weaknesses, self-awareness, and challenges around organisational structures and procedures. These issues seem to underpin the organisational difficulties encountered by the organisations studied and seemed to emanate from leaders' disregard or dislocation from the realities within which they and their organisations exist. Study 2 identified six thematic areas which define the leadership context: followers, sub-leader difficulties, attention to customers and service delivery, engagement with stakeholders, self-awareness and use of organisational systems and procedures. Study 3 identified three main issue areas: difficulties around the use of organisational procedures and structures, national political dimensions to corporate leadership and succession problems around the next line of leaders. There seems to be agreement across the three studies on the following: sub-leader and



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organisational systems challenges, service delivery and self-awareness issues and stakeholder concerns.

These findings mirror some of the issues raised by Puplampu (2005b) in a study of organisational ill-health and are perhaps context specific in that the extant literatures hardly make any references to leadership issues around failure to develop corporate systems, succession problems, buck-passing, lack of self-renewal and fear of political powers. As noted by Mellahi (2000), many context specific issues are eluding management training and leader development due to their absence from the literatures.

Of particular interest are the political dimensions of corporate leadership. National political forces represent a reality that corporate leaders in Ghana have to deal with. As Agle *et al.* (1999) note, stakeholders are a crucial element in CEO work. These findings consolidate the arguments raised by Stacey (2007) and Nienaber and Roodt (2008) that leadership – however it is conceptualised – is a grounded and dynamic reality which can best be understood within its context of occurrence. Also of interest is the concern raised about using or developing organisational structures and procedures. Much of the extant leadership literature treats these as given. However, the balance of evidence from this study suggests that in the Ghanaian setting, structural integrity and institutional and procedural arrangements are critical matters which deserve leader attention since they may moderate the leadership process.

Corporate leaders (across private, public and NGO) in Ghana appear to operate within a setting which may be described as politically nuanced, with inroads into corporate functioning by external political interests and considerations. There are difficulties with building up the capacity and involvement of subordinate managers and leaders. There are obvious attempts by some leaders to understand and use structures and systems, although with difficulty – such as those arising from boards that disregard their proper function. There are challenges around paying requisite attention to stakeholders such as customers and clients. Some leaders appear to suffer from weak self evaluative capacity.

While the above may paint a dismal picture, the findings also suggest that leaders are making efforts at using tools such as authority schedules, organisational charts and laws as well as engaging employees and subordinates. There seems, therefore, a tension in the execution of leadership: weak personal capacities are compounded by political nuances, interferences; weak sub-leadership realities are compounding efforts at attention to client, other stakeholder demands and succession. The Ghanaian corporate leader appears caught in a bind. There does not appear to be a unifying schema within which to engage the leadership process. It seems inconceivable to have some leaders articulate the suggestion that the environment is too turbulent for systems and structures or that due to misinterpretations, succession plans cannot be formalised. However, when set against the politicization of the leadership process, one can see the dilemma. It is disconcerting when some leaders are characterised as loving their cars and the perks. But that is the felt reality being expressed. In this regard, the work of Denton and Vloeberghs (2003) referred to earlier is important: that African corporate leaders lack the models, blueprints or schemas upon which to base much of their work.

#### *Modelling leadership*

Given the above, how can the findings assist in conceptualizing a notion of leadership that recognises (but perhaps rises above) the conundrums within the Ghanaian and

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broader African context? The data suggest the need for an iterative and reflexive dialectic: leadership as “engagement” and leadership as “system development”.

While some writers (Barker, 1997; Dash, 2005) suggest that much of extant leadership research with its esoteric arguments does not find its way into leadership practices in ordinary organisations (or practising leaders hardly take note of the esoteric discourses which seem to preoccupy researchers), others like Schilling (2007) note that few studies have addressed leadership using everyday realities. This study is different. Its results are derived from everyday realities, experiences and conundrums. It draws on felt realities and grounded suggestions such as: leaders need to interrogate their sense of self, engage in self-renewal and deploy behaviours which are cognisant of their responsibilities. It draws on issues raised such as: need for attention to stakeholders, need note and deal with the national political aspects of corporate life; expressed concern that corporate leaders should understand that they have “bosses”, superiors or constituents towards whom they owe a fiduciary responsibility. The study draws out concerns around customer/client issues which both leaders and subordinates seem unable to address. There is evidently a call that Ghanaian corporate leaders need to engage with these issues that are seen as important. These are the everyday realities on the ground. These are the challenges and problems that the sampled organisations are confronted with. This raises the matter of responsiveness: what do leaders need to recognise, pay attention to, understand or respond to – within their environment? This is the point of Agulanna’s (2006) assertion noted earlier about the absence of responsive and responsible leadership in Africa. Responsiveness and responsibility requires engagement with or attention to those parameters that are seen as important. Esoteric abstractions may be commendable, but the leadership discourse in Ghana and perhaps much of developing Africa may call for reified attention to what, to some, may appear mundane.

*Leadership as “engagement”.* The notion of “engagement” is used to suggest that leaders necessarily interconnect their capacities to relevant context factors or variables in order to execute their role. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) drawing on earlier work of Schaufeli *et al.* (2002, p. 209) define work “engagement” as characterised by “vigour, dedication and absorption”. This represents an active “interconnection”. Obviously leaders who lack plans, are unable to tackle political interferences, preside over decaying organisations, etc. are anything other than dedicated and absorbed. May *et al.* (2004) provide an exposition of engagement. They suggest that it represents the person’s harnessing, employment and deployment of their self, cognition, emotion and behaviours in the performance of their roles. Engagement is, however, incomplete if the expectations and requirements of the present circumstances do not drive the process of interconnection. Perhaps, a quote from the data may illustrate the point:

You have a boss. You may be a boss, but you also have a boss, sometimes this reality is lost on corporate executives; we have shareholders and stockholders. We have a fiduciary responsibility (Quote from interviews).

These issues are the dynamics and problematics that leaders are supposed to tackle, take into account or which seem to determine assessments of whether leadership is taking place or not (Schilling, 2007). Self-awareness, reflexivity and reflection may consolidate engagement, in that the leaders in engaging with these issues have to be aware of their own feelings, behaviours and psychological postures while doing so (Mulec, 2006;

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Luthans *et al.*, 2004). The engaged leader is, therefore, likely to be actively interconnected with the challenges, concerns and expectations of constituents. Engaged leadership is likely to occupy itself also with a certain amount of introspection about capacity and self-renewal. It is also likely to demonstrate recognition of responsibility and accountability.

Another strand emerging from the present study is the need for leaders to build organisational systems and frameworks – suggesting that leadership also means system development. For Ghana, this seems important. This is examined in the sections that follow.

*Leadership as “system development”*. Leadership as system development answers the question “How do leaders engage”? Here, one is considering the frameworks by which leaders enact or execute their role. Drawing on Frederick and Wasieleski (2002) and Nicholson (2005), we note that leadership is executed in the context of a social contract. Contracts need systems by which they can be operationalised. It is, therefore, significant that respondents indicate the need for the leader to develop systems and structures to deal with the internal workings of the organisation and to liaise with external constituents. Across all three studies, concerns around having to make the organisational structure and systems work, having to deal with stakeholders such as politicians and boards and managing resources in a difficult economic climate as well as problems with frameworks for dealing with succession and lack of capacity of sub-leaders all come up. There is much anecdotal as well as empirical evidence (Puplampu, 2005b; Zame *et al.*, 2008) that a perennial problem in Ghanaian organisations is the lack of structures and systems and procedures. Leadership relevance, therefore, in the business of promoting the organisational good (Collier and Esteban, 2000), perpetuity and sustainability seems to include attention to systemic frameworks for action. One gets the impression that leaders are required to create systems and frameworks that allow the leader to engage with the multiplicity of organisational dynamics towards goal attainment and the protection of stakeholder interests.

These arguments are particularly interesting as work by Huxham and Vangen (2000, p. 1171), using action research interventions in the UK, concluded that structures and processes are important to leadership action in collaborative agendas. While they take something of a critical stance on the impact and place of structures as oftentimes “imposed” and perhaps constraining the collaborative and leading processes, the present work takes a more existentialist position, suggesting that structures and systems are required to be created by leaders as a way of better dealing with the myriad of agendas, requirements and challenges in the Ghanaian context. It seems the Ghanaian situation calls for greater attention to organisational structures and systems, dedicated processes that go beyond the leader as their absence seems to act as a constraint on leadership as an agency for organisational growth, transformation and sustainability. By structures and systems, we are referring to organisational methods, routines, modus, mechanisms and protocols that assist in engagement, gearing and traction between organisational and stakeholder goals and leader activity and agendas. Anecdotally, for example, a noted Ghanaian corporate leader (Ghana’s CEO of the year 2007), Kofi Amoabeng, CEO of the UT Group of companies ([www.utfinancialservices.com](http://www.utfinancialservices.com)) has consistently argued (Front Page News Radio Programme, JoyFM Accra, August 7, 2009) that Ghana’s leadership and organisational problems arise in large measure from a lack of systems and/or lack of adherence to systems. He is known to have attributed the

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growth of his group (financial services, logistics and banking) to the early implementation of structures and systems for client issues, human resource issues, regulatory compliance, etc. Leadership as system development is, therefore, likely to be focused on active attention to and development of those structures, systems and procedures which enable such leadership engage with its constituents as required under leadership as engagement.

These findings, which arise from considering the challenges faced by corporate leadership, provide some basis for setting out a reflexive and context dynamic frame for leadership in Ghana. What conclusions can we draw and what are the potential implications of these findings for leadership research and practice?

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to the growing call to contextualise leadership thinking by examining leadership challenges in Ghana. Specifically, it adds to this area by answering Tsui *et al.*'s (2007) call for more country specific research. While it may be true that other leadership studies have raised the matter of stakeholders and relationships (Rost, 1993), some have looked at self reflection (Luthans *et al.*, 2004), still others have raised the issue of structures and processes (Huxham and Vangen, 2000), hardly any appear to have brought these variables together in a localised Sub-Saharan Africa setting. It is, therefore, a small but relevant contribution, that this study brings these together as a dialectic for Ghanaian leadership. We conclude that the leadership challenge within the Ghanaian and perhaps African context is one of appreciating the urgency with which leadership needs to engage with all the intents, potentialities and expectations of constituents. We join others in confirming that it is the absence of this reified spirit of engagement which is at the heart of Africa's leadership conundrum. We further suggest that African corporate leaders may find that they are more likely to contribute to both corporate and national development the more they focus their attention on building sustainable frameworks and processes within their organisations. Such efforts are likely to lead to institutions and organisations which possess viable mechanisms for traction with the issues that require engagement. Perhaps, if attention is paid to these rather fundamental points at firm level, a groundswell of capacity may emerge to encompass the national level – as writers like Porter (1998) have argued that corporate (as well as national) growth is perhaps a function of progressive iterations of structural and systemic improvements. Perhaps, it is time to implore current and emergent leaders to pay attention to basic parameters of how things should be done and what mechanisms would sustain those “things”. Indeed, this is the tangential conclusion drawn by Zame *et al.* in their study of educational reforms in Ghana: reforms have failed because of the lack of attention to processes and systems for something as fundamentally obvious as Head Teacher development. Perhaps, the challenge is in recognising the obvious.

As noted earlier, scholars arguing for contextualisation are not suggesting that context rich research would or should necessarily unearth unique and entirely new phenomena or explanations; rather the practicalities and applied implications of much of social science research calls for confidence in the findings as useful locally as well as relevant. The present work therefore goes some way to provide evidence that is applicable to Ghana and perhaps elsewhere (even outside Africa). This possibility does not detract from the context specificity of the findings. It simply provides basis for the

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argument that as more such country specific findings emerge, we may through a series of cumulative concentric iterations, achieve a measure of generalist or universalistic thought around the leadership phenomenon. Universalism, however, in this case, is not the starting hermeneutic.

### *Limitations*

There are three main limitations with this research. First, the sample size may be considered small and the data may be considered exploratory. Second, the applied interventions which formed the basis of Study 1 may be unacceptable to some. Third, the design and approach to data did not directly seek respondent views on the emerging conceptualisation. These were inferred from respondent statements and thematic interpretations. These limitations notwithstanding, the findings provide us with a platform for discussing leaders and leadership in Ghana and a frame for research on which to build further work.

### **Implications**

This study demonstrates that a context driven study of leadership has the possibility to generate critical nuances relevant for the locale. It presents the interplaying notions of leadership as engagement and leadership as system development as concepts, which may be useful in capturing leadership in a country like Ghana. These – tentatively at least – have implications for researching leadership, for practice and for leadership development.

### *Researching leadership in Ghana/Africa*

There is, currently, much debate in the literature about the epistemological traditions of leadership research. For example, Dash (2005), queries what leadership researchers study and how they construct research to study those issues. He notes that much of everyday leadership processes in organisations as well as political life appear to go on without much attention to the esoteric arguments which occupy the attention of leadership researchers. For this reason, Dash suggests the urgent need to re-examine the methodological conventions of current leadership research. Kelly (2008) has also commented on the theory-testing mode in leadership research, noting that it has contributed to some confusion about what is being studied. These criticisms of the extant literature and research are particularly poignant when taken from the perspective of the developing world.

If leadership is to have relevance for the good of the organisations within which it operates (Collier and Esteban, 2000), if leadership is to be developed and taught with its operating context in mind (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006), then one cannot but agree with the critical comments of Dash and others. Leadership, a social construction (Grint, 2005), is indeed “discursive and locally produced” (Kelly, 2008, p. 764). Leadership research has to be situated in everyday practicalities (Nienaber and Roodt, 2008). The research reported here was, therefore, purposely designed to access leadership *in situ*, in an interventionist, grounded and applied mode. Respondents in this Ghanaian study, give voice to some everyday variables which are not covered in the extant literature: “political interferences”, “managerial buck-passing”, “love of cars”, “development of systems and procedures”, etc. Here, we find failings, foibles and not-so-pleasant realities expressed. That some of these issues may not necessarily

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represent the most enabling or enamouring behaviours does not mean their presence must not be used to inform leadership thinking. Much of the drive around ethical leadership (Price, 2000; Rost, 1995 and others) derives from the recognition of extant unethical behaviours. Leadership research in Africa must remain grounded and driven by a contextual and indigenized agenda so that the understandings reached would more likely find relevance in application (Fletcher, 2009).

Further research may be pursued along two lines. First, research into the notions of leadership as *engagement* and leadership as *system* development would be necessary to explicate how the two interplay, particularly concerning stakeholder interests as well as impact on actual organisational performance (Agle *et al.*, 1999; Svensson and Wood, 2006). Second, there is the need to investigate everyday leadership and managerial issues and situations as well as the perceived role of leadership as an agent (Svensson *et al.*, 2008) in the success or failure of organisations in Ghana. This is perhaps best done using more applied and phenomenological approaches – a point at once supported and disputed by Kelly (2008). Third, from an applied standpoint, it may be necessary to research how leaders who are believed to be *engaged* and those who are perceived to have developed structures and systems actually went about doing so.

Whatever model of research is adopted, a useful position is that academics and scholars need to find ways of demonstrating how their outputs solve problems on the ground (Fletcher, 2009).

### *Leadership practice*

It seems the practice of corporate leadership on the continent has to adopt a deeper sense of how to engage with its situational, political and socio-economic realities. It also seems that the paucity of leadership talent or exemplars that many decry arises from the inability or unwillingness to identify the interconnection between the role being occupied by the leader and the interests of stakeholders. As Sidani (2008) notes, the leadership which seems relevant to the socio-cultural context of Africa is one that must take account of “*asabiya*”, a North African/Arabic nuance that is perhaps akin to “*ubuntu*” of the Zulu. “*Asabiya*”, calls for a certain recognition of the bonds with others within the group or nation and a recognition of the collective aspirations, which the role and work of the leader are supposed to advance. Both “*asabiya*” and “*ubuntu*” clearly suggest “engagement” by the leader with others, who may be called the stakeholders. In this regard, one may refer to the work of Wood and Winston (2007), on measuring leader accountability. To measure accountability, one needs to articulate what one is being accountable for (in other words, one’s engagement with the role and the interests which define the role); to whom one is being accountable (in other words, leadership engagement with stakeholders) and how such accountability is to be operationalised in everyday practice (leadership systems and structures).

A number of related applied suggestions may be made. First, Ghanaian leaders need to devote time and attention to self reflection. Reflection should enable the interrogation of the match or mismatch between own competencies, dispositions and spirit of engagement with the peculiar leadership role at hand within any particular organisation. Such reflection is likely to provide a psychological base for the behavioural engagement with the range of issues, stakeholders and communities that are of import. Second, followers and interested constituents perhaps need to understand and call for what may be described as greater leader dispositional engagement (vigour, dedication, absorption)

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and structural engagement (interconnect with issues, followers and interested parties). Third, leaders need to expend resources working with constituents to create and develop systems and processes for succession, organisational coordination, relationships with external powers, etc. Given the scepticisms around the actual impact of leaders and their performance on organisational accomplishments (Svensson *et al.*, 2008) it is imperative that the community of stakeholders or constituents should be able to demonstrate that leader engagements and particular actions (whether collaborative, developmental or creational) facilitated certain achievements in and of the organisation. For Africa this seems critical as a leverage for accountability and underscores the argument for contextual leader effectiveness (Svensson and Wood, 2006).

#### *Leadership development*

Perhaps, the matter of leadership development needs to take as a point of departure, Barker's title referred to at the beginning of this paper: "How can we train leaders if we don't know what leadership is?" Taking a cue from the findings reported here, if leadership is conceptualised as engagement and system development, then leadership development in Ghana may need to focus on facilitating a better understanding of the nature of leadership engagement with stakeholders including clients and national political interest groups. Leadership development also needs to pay attention to the dynamics around followers – including how to build up sub-leaders. Self-awareness and self-renewal also appear to be critical skills. Corporate leaders also need to learn how to develop procedural and structural mechanisms that allow the appropriate interconnection between stakeholder interests, task systems and the leader's own approaches.

Scholars who have explored leadership development and the teaching of leadership have raised issues around the nature, content and processes of leader development, especially in business schools. Those who address the matter in Africa stress the need for contextual understanding (Mellahi, 2000; Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006; Mulec, 2006; Magner, 2008). The problem, however, is that there are not enough cogent articulations of a contextualised leadership which impinge on syllabi in college or business school education. The dominant traditions remain teaching around concepts and ideas such as transformational/transactional leadership, styles of leadership, differences between leadership and management and so on (what Washbush has called the "leadership mantra" and "leadership jungle" p. 1084). However, as Stacey (2007) indicates, discourses on organisations and their management are deeply rooted in the underlying assumptions and philosophies of nations and regions. Obviously, the continued use of conceptualisations which are not grounded in the context would only continue to undermine the efforts at developing and teaching leadership in African Business Schools – for there are limitations on the functional mobility of Western management concepts (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Smith *et al.*, 1996). There is, therefore, a need for a paradigm shift towards incorporating location specific nuances into management and leadership development frameworks. As noted earlier, Nienaber and Roodt (2008), for example, provide evidence that in South Africa, the distinction between leadership and management is at best a tenuous one. Location specific nuances may appear to some to be rather mundane and inelegant, but those are the challenges of the locale. We posit that attention to such is likely to yield verifiable fruit in organisational growth, sustainability and ultimately, national development.

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