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## Leading with Integrity Under Pressure: The Activist Leadership Model

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AKINWUMI OKE, JAY BRAND, SHIRLEY FREED,  
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**LEADING WITH INTEGRITY UNDER  
PRESSURE: THE ACTIVIST LEADERSHIP  
MODEL**

**Abstract:** This article proposes that an effective activist leadership model has important significance for leaders in ethically challenging contexts. Findings from the grounded theory study present activist leadership theory and competencies or qualities exhibited by “activist leaders” in the public sector. These support the achievement of “above-the-norm” organizational performance despite the constraints of weak governance institutions within their specified contexts. Activist leadership rests on leaders’ (a) managerial and personal approach; (b) cognitive disposition to achieving good governance outcomes; and (c) pragmatic leadership approach to resolving leadership challenges in weak institutional contexts. These leaders can deliver effective leadership despite weak institutional/governance frameworks, not by using a specific leadership technique, but rather by manifesting their own personal convictions for achieving results. Implications for Christian leaders in challenging contexts are discussed.

**Keywords:** *activist leader; activist leadership model; integrity; leadership*

## **Introduction**

Do leaders matter? This age-old question about the individual leader’s role in fostering positive organizational outcomes has been at the heart of leadership research for decades (Jones & Olken, 2005). Understanding the impact of

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effective leadership on achieving organizational objectives, both in public and private sector organizations, remains an important aim of contemporary leadership investigation. This quest for a better understanding of the role of effective leadership in organizations rests on two key suppositions: 1) achievement of organizational goals is impossible without some form of sustained impulse provided by leaders (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005), and 2) effective leadership is one of the key levers of influence upon which organizations rely for achieving their goals and objectives.

Effective leadership is demonstrated through a relationship between leaders and followers in a context wherein leadership is exercised (Agho, 2009; Burns, 1998). Leaders have a catalytic effect on organizational members, especially through the use of integrated transformational, transactional, and adaptive leadership behaviors (Bass, 1997; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Cooper & Nirenberg, 2012; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Leavy, 2013).

O'Reilly and Reed defined this association between leadership effectiveness and organizational outcomes (2010) as the “cascade of change narrative.” Acknowledging leaders' responsibility and viewing leadership as the agency through which internal and external pressures are addressed, and changes are outlined is the key to developing new services for meeting organizational objectives.

## **How Leaders Matter in Developing Democracies**

The unique context and governance challenges within developing democracies, mainly where endemic corruption has characterized the public sector, poses an even bigger question: Do leaders' ethics and morality matter? The answer to this question will highlight the leadership's ethical challenges in difficult environments and support the drive towards restoring confidence in public officials. This is particularly true in the face of a pervasive lack of trust in leadership, owing to the public and private realm merger in most democratic cultures (Wolin, 2009).

Therefore, exploring leadership in ethically ambiguous contexts has significant implications for building credibility in societies where pervasive corruption and mutual distrust are the key challenges in achieving governance outcomes for the common good.

### *The Activist Leader*

The complex leadership sphere in developing countries poses many challenges to achieving current and future public-sector leaders' effectiveness. A new breed of leaders is needed: the activist leader. Some authors have recognized this kind of “atypical” leader as a critical factor for achieving sustain-

able improvements in governance (Abah, 2012; Goke, 2006; Grindle, 1997; Leonard, 1987, 2008; Thomas, 2008). In this sense, the term “atypical” should not be interpreted with negative connotation but as reflecting leadership performance that reaches above the norm within its cultural and developmental context. This perspective explores the same conceptual vein as similar research that investigated “positive deviants” of organization performance/effectiveness within weak governance environments, including their leadership implications (Abah, 2012; Agba, 2012; Leonard, 2008).

One meaningful way this emerging class of leaders is reshaping public policy for the common good involves facing down entrenched and elite political interests. This unusual willingness to confront the status quo and go against the grain enhances reform in critical governance sectors. These public sector leaders combine high technocratic acumen with transparency in governance by successfully implementing policies that promote collective welfare despite facing deep-seated opposition from powerful elite class interests. They expose corruption in high offices, refocusing public expenditure away from patronage politics and implementing strict reform policies to provide better access to public goods and services in a complex public leadership environment.

Within public sector organizations, activist leaders direct and energize followers’ willingness to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Abah, 2012) while influencing the political and cultural context within which they must operate (Leonard, 1987). Activist leadership becomes even more important when considered within the context of political and/or executive leadership performance, which is a critical factor in determining national economic growth and development (Jones & Olken, 2005), as a sustainable change in public sector administration (Nabatchi, Goerdel, & Peffer, 2011), as governance effectiveness (Stoker, 1998), and as overall public institutional performance or success (Jung & Choi, 2011).

Several studies have acknowledged the importance of leadership for achieving organizational goals, and activist leaders have been identified as an emerging class of leaders—especially within developing countries in Africa (Abah, 2012; Leonard, 2008). However, there remains a dearth of research on public sector leadership that thoroughly explains how activist leaders in difficult contexts achieve atypical performance, despite the weak governance systems in which they operate. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this knowledge gap by investigating leaders in developing countries who can start and sustain reforms in public agencies.

A better understanding of activist leadership in the public sector would provide valuable insights into why charismatic leadership alone has been insufficient for effectiveness, as noted in African political leadership literature

(Osaghae, 2010). This research responds to current public sector leadership's shift from thinking about "leaders separate from their contexts to thinking about leadership within the continuously changing context of a complex, adaptive inter-connected system" (Hartley & Benington, 2011, p. 5), where an individual agency of leadership may activate positive institutional changes within the public domain.

This research is also intuitive because the world is full of leaders who are doing both moral good and evil, almost in equal measure. The need for effective leadership in difficult environments remains one of the most significant ethical challenges in our world. It places a premium on society's ability to bring up morally competent leaders. Filling this need is essential, given the recent rise of populist and nationalistic leaders. This rise has been regarded as the result of ethical development failures at both the individual and organizational levels.

## The Study

Nigeria's young democracy has witnessed the emergence of a new breed of leaders faced with the challenges of delivering good governance outcomes within the weak institutional environments; many of these environments were inherited from past military regimes and are characterized by a culture of corruption and lack of accountability. These young democratic leaders have exhibited an uncanny ability to change the political and institutional landscape of governance environments bequeathed to them. They have achieved this by providing good governance outcomes and strengthening the institutions they lead.

Thus, this small but growing group of activists who are redefining public sector governance by reshaping the organizations they led provided this study's focus. The study explored the unique dispositions, skills, values, and/or behaviors of this class of leaders. This was done to understand their emergence of their development, decision-making, and other personal leadership characteristics that evolved into their current activist potential. These factors helped to develop a grounded theory regarding how the leadership competencies/qualities exhibited by this new breed of public sector leaders support the achievement of "above-the-norm" organizational performance in the public sector, despite the constraints of weak governance institutions within their specified contexts.

This research explored the following central question: How do these activist leaders exercise leadership in a morally and ethically different way than has been practiced in their governance context?

Several sub-questions were deployed regarding how these leaders characterize their leadership within their context. Their adoption of a more altruistic use of power and authority in a context is widely regarded as lacking accountability. These questions addressed the incentives and challenges that leaders

have faced to achieve organizational goals with a much higher success rate than expected within their context.

The investigation method adopted for this study was a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273), a general qualitative research method designed to build a substantive theory based on the systematic collection and analysis of empirical data. Data collection was primarily conducted through eleven open-ended narrative interviews with a purposive sample of seven public sector leaders. Each interviewee had to meet five criteria: (1) measurable improvement in organizational performance during their tenure in public office; (2) notable activism as expressed in their use of public office to effect social change within their leadership context; (3) held a public sector leadership role for a minimum of three years; (4) were in leadership at national and/or sub-national levels; and (5) validated by a subject matter expert. Each interview averaged two hours in duration. Four additional respondents were interviewed who were either a past or present associate/subordinate of five of the seven leaders interviewed in the study; these respondents had directly experienced these leaders' approach to leadership.

The seven leaders were within the age range of 45–55 years old. They were all university-educated graduates, and some had advanced degrees. All participants had spent an average of 10–15 years in a professional capacity in private sector organizations before being recruited into the public sector roles. They were from the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Thus, each participant provided a rich perspective on their socialization and religious orientations in a multiethnic and pluralist society. This purposive sample included three females and four males to highlight potential gender differences in their leadership approach.

The four additional respondents were educated to a degree level and had professional relationships with the leaders. They had spent a minimum of two years working together with the named leader within their public or private sector roles. Their interviews provided validation for the emergent themes in the leaders' stories. Their voices also served as a form of triangulation because they helped to “corroborate evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2012, loc. 4654). There was significant congruence between the leaders' views and the respondents' perceptions of leadership experiences from a follower perspective.

Three major themes emerged from interviews with the leaders: (a) their managerial and personal approach to leadership; (b) their cognitive disposition to achieving good governance outcomes; and (c) their pragmatic leadership approach to resolving the unique leadership challenges in weak institutional contexts. These leaders could deliver effective leadership despite weak institutional and/or governance frameworks, not by using a specific leader-

ship technique, but rather by manifesting their own personal convictions for achieving results—convictions that emerged from a matured conceptualization of their self-integration process. They recalled how they engaged in professional competence, demonstrated integrity in character, and developed a resilient capacity in their leadership exercise.

## **The Importance of Competence**

The interviewed leaders recognized the importance of acquired training and experience as a key leadership requirement within the public sphere. They were tenacious in adapting to the leadership challenges posed by the complexities in a young democracy, which arose from low accountability, corruption, and ethnic nepotism.

### *Good Training*

Education, professional experience, and prior personal leadership development significantly enhanced leaders' competence in handling complex problems. One leader alluded to the fact that what she brings to her public leadership is "a combination of good training and experience." Another referred to their class of public sector leaders as "technocrats," a profoundly political word in Nigeria's political discourse. This term was traditionally coined to label brilliant professionals and academics who served in public leadership roles under the military regimes from 1988 to 1999; more recently, it has been used to describe perceived reformers and transformational leaders who are not mired in the political mudslinging of party politics. One leader also described her leadership's competency requirement as having developed a "capacity to intellectually assess problems and process a solution to it."

The leaders were established professionals in law, journalism, health-related disciplines, financial services, economics, etc. They brought to these roles a fully-developed set of skills from ordered work environments in the private sector. Their competence was expressed in their reference to having a sense of vision, strategic thinking, and ability to follow through on a course of action, even when no clear direction was articulated by their public sector principal (either the president or state governor, as the case may be). This ability to conceptualize solution pathways required them to combine skills acquired through the attainment of a decent education and quality experience.

### *Good Experience*

The importance of quality experiences was evident in Aminu's assertion that in addition to proper training, "good experience matters." Aminu was a 48-year-old male public-sector leader who held appointed positions at the

state and federal level for seven years. In his roles, he initiated sector-wide reforms in education and youth development. He was recognized as a competent leader who secured significant changes in both sectors—first at the sub-national (state), and later at the national level as a federal minister. He described competence in terms of having the right training combined with the right experiences as important elements of effective leadership in his context. He quipped further that “there were lots of very educated people, probably with good value systems in their homes, but without the experience and exposure, they were not able to take on the challenge: Nigeria.”

Binta, a 56-year-old female leader who held three different roles at the national level over eight years, shared similar sentiments on the pivotal role of competency in effective public leadership in tough contexts. She was initially appointed into a presidential advisory role, and she later became a federal minister responsible for two different ministerial portfolios. She managed a conditional grant transfer scheme that delivered basic services to the poor and vulnerable across the country—a scheme highly regarded as one of the most transparently administered in the world. She expressed her conviction that competence involves having the “right skills.” From her experience in leadership, “somebody must be skilled; they must be trained and must have the cognitive capability to be able to connect the dots.” She described competence more in terms of the leaders’ ability to exercise the “intellectual capacity for analyzing problems.” In her view, her competence was shown through being able to “intellectually process what exactly the problem really is and to have that mind of inquiry that will enable me to look at options and mobilize different resources that would solve a problem.”

The additional respondents who highlighted pivotal moments also supported this idea that these skill sets were instrumental to the leaders’ effectiveness in situations requiring effective leadership. One respondent described his former boss as “a solid individual” with the resilience to solve any problem. Effective leaders in weak governance contexts are perceived as competent individuals. Competency and capability can be developed through experience in various settings and transferred into the public domain.

### *Adaptable Leadership*

The notion of the transferability of competence from private to public sector roles indicates that these leaders could adapt their leadership to include the right mix of leadership competencies into their given contexts. This understanding is supported by research in skill-based leadership, which has provided evidence that while “knowledge and expertise are commonly held to represent domain-specific capabilities” (Phye, 1990), leadership skills are more

generalizable or transferable (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). This research is based on earlier studies that examined the extent to which problem-solving and social skills developed in one setting transfer to another (Zaccaro, Foti, & Kenny, 1991).

According to the model of Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000), effective leadership, when viewed through this lens, reflects the leaders' capacity in deploying the right capabilities, knowledge, and skills such as "perspective-taking" in problem-solving as a form of "social cognition." By framing the often ill-defined problems of complex environments in a way that facilitates adaptable solutions, effective leaders work as part of a socio-technical system, and this may explain their above-the-norm performance in weak contexts (Mumford et al., 2000, p. 14).

One way these leaders showed themselves effective was through their use of pragmatic leadership behaviors to achieve organizational goals. They recalled being innovative and creative in problem-solving approaches while engendering inclusive decision-making among team members. They provided opportunities for institution-building, allowing for the establishment of change/reform in their organizations. This illustrated their adaptive capacities in the area of understanding and their use of transactional and transformational leadership behaviors in communicating and motivating staff for higher performance.

This study also found that leaders were intrinsically motivated to deliver desirable governance outcomes, even when there were no clearly defined performance goals. Their desire to achieve results was guided by a strong personal value system, developed through family influences and socialization during their formative years. They also had a high achievement focus in their personal life. These self-motivated individuals were intrinsically motivated to improve the organizations they led constantly.

## **A Character of Integrity**

How were these leaders able to achieve higher performance levels than normally would be expected in their context? Their intrinsic motivation led them to use their competence, leadership capacity, and strength of character to adapt their leadership behaviors, allowing them to better respond to the complexity of their public-sector context. These leaders transcended the peculiar pitfalls of leadership by achieving high congruence in their notions of self, which they then successfully deployed through intelligent decision-making for the common good through effective use of social power.

### *Trustworthy Reputation*

Leaders had a reputation for integrity and of being ethical in their dealings

in previous organizational or work contexts. The subordinate respondents repeatedly expressed their trust in these leaders, indicating that they trusted these leaders and their ability to behave in a way that prompted mutual trust. It is instructive to note that none of the leaders in this study had any allegations of corruption (financial or ethical) leveled against them, despite having spent an average of three to five years in public service. They were also mindful of the dangers of nepotism (both ethnic and religious) in a multiethnic context. This is a significant achievement in a context infamous for corruption and abuse of office by public officials.

Subscribing to a set of moral qualities and ethical standards appears to be a common thread in the personal attributes to which the leaders ascribed. They were firm believers in maintaining a strong moral compass and holding themselves to a higher moral standard, based on their personal convictions and moral values.

Binta believed she wouldn't have survived in office or attained her high public leadership appointment without integrity. She opined that "if you've got proven integrity, then you're good for it." Proven integrity, in her view, has no other criterion than a moral virtue that can be "experienced and can be vouched for." She asserted that her first appointment into public office was because former President Obasanjo trusted her. She was convinced that her high moral standards in the face of corruption were crucial for the success in her leadership role. This explains why she was tasked with managing a conditional cash transfer scheme worth \$500,000,000.

### *Roots and Wings*

Binta further stressed the role of her upbringing in developing integrity in leadership. She stated, "It's my upbringing. It's my training. It's my experience. It's those three things." For her, those three factors shape a leader. When probed about her upbringing, she explain it as "a set of values that you will not compromise as you grow up." These are embodied in the "roots and wings to fly." The "roots are your values, your culture, your religion, and the wings are the education." For her, the moral values from early life socialization experiences are the roots that sustain consistent moral action in her life and her public leadership. She concluded by saying, "What you stand for in your home does influence what you do in the public place."

Oghene (an associate and former staff of Binta) further added that in his experience with Binta, she was clear about what she wanted to achieve and that her decisions were "not colored by material considerations." This enabled her to attract the best people. He also affirmed her integrity in an environment where other primordial considerations cloud decision-making. He was quick to add that even though she is Fulani (from the North), her core team consisted of peo-

ple like him—an Urhobo (from the Niger Delta). This, in his view, meant she was above the primordial sentiments that corrupt effectiveness in the public sector.

### *Character is Fundamental*

There was Amaka, a 54-year-old female leader who also held three different roles at the national level of governance. She held ministerial positions in two separate portfolios at the national level and was a leading pioneer for a series of institutional reforms in ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. She led a radical reform in two federal agencies for over four years. As far as she was concerned, “Character is fundamental and foundational.” She believed her character, which was developed through her upbringing, had instilled a moral value system that helped her make a difference in public life and, ultimately, defined the leader she became as an adult. She further describes leadership without character “as a locust,” which destroys the very fabric of society.

For Amaka, effective leadership is being able to “combine integrity, the ethical standards” with good career experiences. She perceives moral character in terms of “ethical standards of behavior” as developed by her family socialization. This is the soil from which effective leadership grows concerning education and experience. Both knowledge and integrity are important. “Knowledge is as important as the integrity factor of leadership . . . without the knowledge, the integrity factor was insufficient.”

### *Prevailing Consistency*

Another leader in the study was Ade, a 54-year-old male leader appointed into a public sector role at the subnational level. He later secured an executive position at the subnational level before serving as a minister at the national level. He remarked that in ensuring that integrity prevails, a leader needs not only be aboveboard; he must also avoid anything inconsistent with his moral stance. He made the point quite elaborately with this anecdotal statement: “You cannot combine personal gain with the desire to make change,” otherwise “you will be humiliated.” This is because “you have to ‘kick axx’ at some point, and you can’t ‘kick axx’ if you share money, or if you are part of [corruption/embezzlement].” His anecdote was a classical one in Nigeria’s public service parlance, that “if your directors share money with you today, you can’t come tomorrow to say you are suspending him/her for incompetence/lack of performance or else he will ask you, ‘Are you mad?’”

### *Deep Values*

The leaders were clear about their reliance on personal values in developing and using integrity in their leadership. Aminu made his point: “In talking about values, the values that I hold dear today, values of honesty, values of hard

work, courage, fortitude, integrity, loyalty, commitment, patriotism, are values I learned from my father.” He further claimed that these values form his “first principles,” and he has taken personal responsibility for developing them into his canon of leadership to the extent that “I’m very intemperate and very intolerant of sloppiness of any kind, or malfeasance. I have absolutely no accommodation for it and people who tried to lure, to seduce, to negotiate things.”

These comments are instructive in understanding the leaders’ self-awareness about the implications for effectiveness in their context. They are also informative about the crucial role of integrity in their leadership. The central question that underlies moral and ethical decisions for most participants was this: “Have you taken this course of action to your personal advantage?” This is because, according to Aminu, “You cannot work in the public sector and carry out successful reforms without making compromises.”

### *Justice and Fairness*

Integrity, as defined by these leaders, included the elements of fairness and justice in decision-making. This is especially important in a multiethnic, multi-religious country where public officers wield enormous power and often dispense favors and gratify close associates. Binta put it this way: “What I have to do is to ensure that I’m fair.” When she considers her allocation decisions, she explained, “I have to think about religion. It’s not to think that it is my religion that will prevail; it’s to think that okay, if they need this to have a religious balance, then I have to look at it.” She also said that she often looks “at the justice in her decisions.” In her leadership roles, she has sought for “everyone to benefit, but I (her Fulani kith and kin) shouldn’t be left behind.” In her view, this has helped ensure that she is always “looking at where the needs are.” This requires balance.

### *A Moral Compass*

Turak, a 56-year-old male public-sector leader, was appointed into a public leadership role at the national level. He led an organization responsible for law enforcement and tackling financial crimes in the country. His pioneering role in the agency while positioning it as a credible institution has been cited in literature as an example of best practice in global anticorruption reforms. He narrated instances when he had to rely on his moral compass and reject huge bribes at the risk of his life and family members. He talked about integrity as taking a long, hard look at the big picture of corruption's impact. This moral compass helped him to “steady the ship” in a “morally deficient public arena” where corrupt officials will offer bribes, and he knew these powerful men and women could “resort to any means necessary,” including intimidation and threats to his life.

This moral compass was hinged on his firm belief in justice. Justice, according to Turaki, is blind. He will serve justice to both Nigeria's big and small men in equal measure—"once you cross the line." His main mantra is to deal in fairness with everyone and with the "fear of God."

These and many more instances of leadership in difficult and often dangerous contexts highlight a leader's capacity to inspire their followers' learning was enhanced when specific personal characteristics were present. A reputation for competence propels them to set higher standards of achievement for themselves and others. Their emotional and social intelligence enabled them to build trust and adjust their leadership to maximize effectiveness. Rejection of leadership's common pitfalls in weak institutional contexts further deepened faith among their followers as leaders openly embrace dialogue and stakeholder consultation. Finally, the leaders' resourcefulness, pragmatism, and imagination helped them keep the goal of achieving the common good at the center of their efforts.

## **A Model of Activist Leadership**

The study concludes that leaders' personal characteristics, understanding of self-concepts, and a pragmatic approach empower them to create a compelling personal vision that communicates a clear ethical framework. They combine these elements with the capacity to use their social and emotional competencies to achieve results. These leaders also believe in modeling effective leadership as a tool for problem-solving and utilize an altruistic approach based on their high integrity and concern for others' well-being. This leadership approach focuses on how much leaders integrate their experience into the sense-making and sense-giving experiences required to lead in a complex environment for the public good. A high level of self-awareness permeates their decision making and inspires consensus among followers toward a shared vision.

Articulating the leaders' values, purposes, and identities within the realms of the constructive developmental paradigm help to discern links between the leaders' conceptual frames of reference and capacity to align others in strategic action (Cook-Greuter, 1999) as cited in Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang (2011, p. 997). This "constructivist developmental" theoretical approach "relies on two key constructs that independently allow for a personal movement from simpler to more complex forms of meaning-making: self-complexity/differentiation and self-integration" (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011, p. 997).

### *Self-integration*

"Self-complexity/differentiation" encompasses individual thought patterns, emotions, and self-concepts that are characterized by the "ability to act amid

a web of complex relationships and allows the individual to cope with complex demands faced in the social world” (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011, p. 998). This is reflected in individual intelligence and the “relational aspects of the leaders’ experience” (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011, p. 998). Effective and outstanding leaders have high degrees of self-complexity/differentiation, and this is demonstrated by how the “leader’s vision translates into sense giving by embracing a variety of conflicting issues while communicating an understanding of various stakeholder realities.” This might explain why these leaders are equipped with the multidimensional self-concept needed for differentiated cognitive and behavioral adaptability in a complex social context.

This entails using more than cognitive abilities in determining appropriate action in a manner that ensures alignment of action and personal value systems in the face of demanding ethical choices. It is a transcendental self-governance ability emanating from a “process sense of self” (Kegan, 2009). The resulting “sense of groundedness” enables pragmatic leaders to develop “a morality imposed by the self and not in accordance with externally imposed moral values” (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011, p. 999).

### *For the Common Good*

Leaders expressed having an “inner moral compass” tied to their ability to critically question personal behavior and avoid pitfalls of nepotism and corruption associated with other public-sector leaders in their context. They exhibited a sense of individual accountability to society (others’ common good), which resulted in the capacity to effectively transcend the status quo and initiate social and organizational change. Resulting from these elements of self-integration is a set of behaviors consistent with “leadership for the common good” (Kegan, 1995; Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

### *A New Ecosystem*

This study further contends that producing leaders who lead public organizations effectively must be the shared responsibility of many parts of the “ecosystem” of public leadership. The findings from this study suggest that the leaders’ success does not lie in following specific leadership techniques but in a combination of factors. These factors make up other “parts” education, skills and competency development, innovation, pragmatism, family socialization, and astute political acumen—of the leadership “ecosystem.” They must be considered for their roles in growing more activist leaders who will deliver effective public-sector leadership at all levels of a national organization. These implications call for a new paradigm in the overall “ecosystem” of leadership development in transition countries and young democracies, an

ecosystem defined by combining the interactions among specific elements of a complex system of individual leadership development.

### *Leading to Make a Positive Difference*

This study drew its conceptual framework of effective leadership from a personal leadership perspective described by Greenstein (1979) and Mumford (2006). The effective leadership persona(s) offered by these two experts provided useful insights into the personal leadership attributes that support effective public leadership. These include: a) a commitment to impacting public policy, as well as actual impact on policy, and b) a clear sense of policy direction by articulating a vision and supporting an institutional framework that encourages creativity and nurtures innovation within the public arena (Greenstein, 1979).

Greenstein's (1979) review of leadership activism in an executive function included "a commitment to make an impact on public policy," and the actual impact on policy achieved by public-sector leaders, as marks of effectiveness. This required leaders' competence, integrity, and character. Greenstein further argued that a key element of success in public leadership is the ability to develop a professional reputation as a skilled leader.

Mumford (2006) described notions that enriched Greenstein's insights by proposing a model of pragmatic leadership as the "exercise of influence by identifying and communicating solutions to significant social problems." Mumford further asserted that pragmatic leaders are effective through their outstanding leadership style because they help to "create structures to support solution implementation and demonstrate the feasibility of these solutions." Mumford and colleagues posited that these leaders use an "analysis of organizational requirements and constraints," a capacity for using "wisdom and perspective-taking," in order "to craft viable solutions likely to work within the organizational context."

### **Implications for Christian Leaders in Difficult Contexts**

This study of effective leaders in ethically challenging environments yielded rich insights that clearly demonstrated that at the heart of effective public-sector leadership was the leader's integrity and character. Leaders lead out of who they are. This conclusion mitigates against any attempt to separate the public and private realm. The leaders in this study could be effective; the values they considered as indisputably valid sustained them. Thus, their public service was guided by their personal values.

This conclusion opposes the tendency to separate the private and public realms found in the West and proposed by proponents of relativism and postmodernism. At the heart of the relativism and postmodernism debate in con-

temporary times lie the apparent merger of the public and private realm in most Western cultures (Wolin, 1960). This “privatization of the public realm” first noted by political theorists in the 1960s was attributed to generalized Christian beliefs and its influence on morality (Ekeh, 1975). By attempting to translate the private realm's moral imperatives into what should be considered a separate and public sphere, modern western societies built on generalized Judeo-Christian beliefs. However, they have run into a conundrum of seeking to interpret actions and rhetoric in two often contrasting realms. This notion of the “two publics has profoundly impacted how public leadership is practiced in Africa and Asia—in predominantly collectivist cultures” (Ekeh, 1975).

In the same vein, our time's pervasive moral relativism seeks to counter a faith-based position concerning ethics and morality. This moral tension has implications for Christian leaders because it constantly pulls at the ontological basis of Christian morality and the firm belief that no one can be ethically good without God. Faith in God and the associated belief systems make a case for anchoring morality and ethical decisions on faith realities such as the inherent sinful human nature, which is opposed to God's inherently good nature. Christian leaders in today's multicultural world are to be reminded that aligning moral and ethical decisions with the divine will is the only antidote to the many failings of ethics in our world today. Mortimer (2013) makes a very reassuring treatise on how well the Christian faith and ethics are almost irrevocably tied together. He suggests that the current moral confusion being experienced because of the deliberate attempt to discount that link between faith and the basis of good morality (p. 7).

This is because Christian leaders in our contemporary world continuously struggle with how much to allow faith to interact/interfere with their ethical decision-making models. The ethical dilemma for these leaders comes from modern views of leadership involving different positions from time to time—irrespective of contexts. When faced with these situations, the need for God in ethical decision-making appears to fluctuate along the spectrum of (a) being against religious inferences; (b) being separate but not antagonistic, or (c) adopting a fully integrated model when religion becomes the ethics, and lastly, (d) allowing religion to transform ethics (Covrig, 2010).

This study's findings suggest that a personal conviction and acceptance of the need for God as the basis of good morality is instructive for the Christian leader; this is because it relies on the Christian ontological foundation for a renewed mindset. As Paul admonishes in Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” This verse is a useful canon for emphasizing God's need in a leaders' morality/ethics and recognizing that it is impossible to make good moral deci-

sions consistently without the renewing of a carnal mind.

The link between personal morality and faith has found support even in the secular arena. It is quite reassuring to learn that a number of secular businesses and corporations have picked up on this need for faith in morality/ethics. This realization by a business is, in part, responsible for the increasing interest in workplace spirituality, which has been described as not only good for the bottom line in terms of profits but also engenders good values both in leaders and followers in organizations (Johnson, 2013). Christian leaders can benefit from demonstrating sound moral and ethical decision-making through reliance on God.

Embracing faith-based morality and ethical foundations outlined in the Christian faith has the potential to transform leadership effectiveness in ethically challenging environments. Ethically competent leaders help moral growth and human flourishing by setting the right moral tone for themselves and the organizations they lead. The view of activist leadership theory is that the privilege of leadership comes with a moral responsibility. The classic biblical example of how leaders can significantly hurt moral growth and flourishing is Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kings 11–13). His “sin” had such a profound impact on ancient Israel that his descendants were not only wiped out, but they became the central focus of Israel’s descent into idolatry.

The same is true today in modern times, as evidenced in by the many failed corporations that litter the corporate and (inter)national landscape. The Bible is clear that “righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach” (Prov. 14: 34). Moral competence in leaders often leads to societal moral growth and improvements in human development.

Therefore, leading ethically in difficult environments requires adopting strategies to improve ethics and control corruption in both the private and public sectors. Seek to understand the spiritual, social, and economic conditions under which public duty and the ethical standards required from them to compete with leaders’ private moral commitments and social obligations.

Avoiding the pitfall of moral leadership or “shadow casters” is a critical work of leadership. This affirms J. Palmer’s assertion that “leaders have the ability to shape the world under which followers must live,” and this has implications for whether a leader helps society morally or otherwise (Palmer, 1998). A leader’s personal convictions about what makes good morality/ethics are therefore not isolated from his/her faith—which is forever fused with the leaders’ personality (and worldview).

## Conclusion

A good illustration of the activist leadership model’s effectiveness is depicted in the following account by one of the activist leaders in this study. It describes

how he went about reforming the Nigeria Football League—and this was years before the monumental scandals that rocked the international governing body of the sport (the Federation of International Football Associations, FIFA) in 2015. He described the Nigeria Football Association in these terms: “[T]he entire leadership system around football especially had more or less collapsed. I recall that when I got into the office as Sports Minister, there were 26 court cases on the Nigeria Football Federation alone; all kinds of litigation . . . .”

In his recollection of the leadership challenge he inherited at the Federal Ministry of Sports Development in Nigeria, football and other sports had been so inadequately managed that the nation had no plans for athlete development. Neither was the sport providing sufficient livelihoods to all the support services and professionals associated with the sports. The tipping point for him was Nigeria's failure to win a single medal at the London Olympics in 2012. This was just three months into his tenure as Minister!

It was instructive that one of the most successful reforms he delivered during his tenure was reorganizing the Nigeria Football League from a comatose, almost non-existent outfit into an independent professional league that could attract local and foreign funding investments—all within two years.

The central question that underlies his moral and ethical decision for rebuilding the sports' management and leadership was how to achieve reform without it being perceived as a course of action to his personal advantage? This is because, according to him, “You cannot work in the public sector and carry out successful reforms without making compromises.”

He further demonstrated that his moral compass helped him to “steady the ship” in a “morally deficient public arena” where corrupt officials who felt threatened by the reforms could resort to any means necessary—blackmail, intimidation, and threats to his life. The threats to life for these activist leaders are real and evidenced in his contemporaries' experiences in office. This made him adopt an approach that views reform as resulting from several “incremental changes” and not a revolution, where massive disruptions to incentive systems appear to be introduced at once.

In his attempt to reform the National Football League, he was constrained by the implications of the Federation of International Football Associations' (FIFA) statutes regarding National Football Federations that prevented ‘political interference’ in sports administration. He yet had to institutionalize new funding models for the sport to benefit all critical stakeholders—players, coaches, fans, and the industry that it serves. In his recollection of how this was accomplished: “[T]he only way was to reconstitute the Federation to accommodate private sector funding in a transparent manner that was needed to support the development of the sport.”

The situation was complicated because the leadership of the Football League gets into office through election by the Chairmen of Federation of Football Associations across the 36 states. It also means the minister alone cannot remove them from office because, based on FIFA statutes, they were elected and not appointed as the minister was. They, therefore, relate with appointed cabinet ministers, if not as an equal, then as someone who has even an inferior mandate than theirs, because (a) he was elected while ministers are appointed, and (b) they have a transnational affiliation that cabinet ministers don't have. This makes it difficult to remove them from office for ineffectiveness.

However, in this case, instituting reforms for the football league by changing its governance structure cannot succeed and be institutionalized if there was no change of leadership. He recalled thinking, "If we did not get rid of them, we would not make progress." He went about trying to obtain his "authorization to implement change" through enlisting the state chairmen of football associations—the only body that could remove the ineffective chairman and institute a new order. In his view, the key to institutionalizing the reform lies in obtaining "the authorization of the people you are working with" that allows you to lead them in a particular direction. A valid authorization to implement change becomes the viable instrument for institutionalizing the change beyond the reform agent.

This process enabled him to reconstitute the football association and eventually led to the league's restructuring. The reconstituted and rebranded professional league could then secure the much-needed funding to operate on a significantly higher effectiveness level. The new management negotiated a \$34 million television rights deal with a multinational corporation for broadcasting the league to a global audience—income that ensured that teams could now pay players' salaries, improve facilities, and enjoy local and international coverage. Today, the Nigeria Professional Football League can engage in capacity development contracts with top leagues in Spain, England, and Brazil. These collaborations have all been of immense benefit to Nigerian players and coaches—and the overall development of the sport in Nigeria.

Despite all these positive developments, his experience was not without controversy. He recalled being accused of trying to appropriate the league for his friends. They labeled him as disrupting the "system" and had threatened his life and family. However, by using his activist leadership skills—(a) managerial and personal approach; (b) a cognitive disposition to achieving good governance outcomes; and (c) a pragmatic leadership approach—he could achieve a significantly improved football management regime for Nigeria without any personal gain. This did not go unnoticed in a country of 200 million football-loving fans who remain appreciative of his efforts and continue to recognize him as an effective public leader.

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