Succession management and corporate sustainability in Ghana: a leadership succession paradox

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Abstract

Purpose – A core responsibility of organizational leaders in a world of increasing competition for best talents is positioning right persons and plans for sustainable growth and progress of their respective organizations. However, attracting top talents for key positions is meaningless if it is not backed by winning retention or succession strategies. This paper aims to assess succession management techniques in the Nzema East District (NED) of Ghana to determine incumbent reliability on its own succession knowledge, practice and sustainability.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a cross-organizational investigation, this study used qualitative approaches to explore succession knowledge and practice as they relate to effective management and sustainability of selected NED organizations. In all, 60 purposively selected participants were involved in the study.

Findings – This study revealed not only that most NED organizational leaders have no succession plans but also that some senior management officials of these organizations, much as their subordinates, lack knowledge and practice of the concept altogether. It also emerged that a leadership succession paradox, where management expressed profound interest in succession planning (SP) learning and practice, adopting SP as a strategic tool and in using SP as insurance for sustainability of NED firms, but presides over the contrary, characterized much of NED management activity.

Research limitations/implications – As a case study, this research is limited in terms of generalizability, but its implications are quite limitless.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in an emerging leadership succession paradox where business executives advocate what, in practice and theory, they are themselves opposed to. Contrary to the logic that we practice what we learn, succession management in NED organizations is not only unethical but also paradoxical. This study has not been published and is not being considered for publication anywhere else.

Keywords Management learning, Leadership succession, Corporate sustainability, Talent management, Human resources

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

For organizations to compete sustainably in contemporary market places, it is critical that they attract, retain and recognize the contribution of both current and future employees (Hurley-Hanson *et al.*, 2020; Wonnia, 2021). It is particularly important to have a framework of leadership succession and progression to help retain key talents of an organization. Ritchie (2020) has explained that organizations that operate within this framework of leadership succession often lend themselves to a highly competitive workforce. In line with this belief, Estedadi *et al.* (2015) have observed that, in an increasingly competitive global economy, businesses are more inclined to planning and managing succession than before (Fadeyi, 2019; Barnabas *et al.*, 2016). This means that more organizations now operate with

replacement candidates for key positions (Seniwoliba, 2015), resulting in deliberate and systematic leadership continuity, knowledge management, individual career advancement and leveraging a reliable talent pipeline (Schoonover, 2011).

This leadership succession imperative, therefore, suggests that organizations risk losing both competitive edge and corporate sustainability if they fail to plan and appropriately implement succession of their key position holders (Fadeyi et al., 2019). Indeed, it has been argued that about 70% of all succession management plans fail at the implementation stage (Prabhakar and Gowthami, 2013), and, in some cases, the "lack of a succession management culture generally reduces the scope for leadership development and planning" (Fadeyi et al., 2019: p. 414). This brings up a number of corporate leadership issues. First, organizations cannot retain top talents needed to protect winning strategies without effective succession planning (SP) and implementation. Second, most organizations do not have succession plans, which adversely affects strategic choices made by senior management officials (SMOs) of these organizations. Third, some firms endeavor to put succession plans together, but such plans are not implemented. Fourth, as organizations fail to design and operationalize succession plans, and as these organizations consequently fail to retain key talents, sustainability of SP knowledge and practice as well as of all other organization-wide operations is severely hampered.

This paper examines these SP issues in the Nzema East District (NED) of Ghana to determine actual levels of SP knowledge and practice by senior SMOs of NED organizations, to assess the impact of such levels of SP knowledge and practice on strategic choices made by same SMOs and to help identify a sustainability position for NED organizations within the existing SP context. It is critical to explore the NED SP situation where there are fears that firms might fold-up due to SP non-practice (Graham, 2018). If left unattended to, NED firms will hardly find the most competent successors the critical leadership positions (Farah et al., 2020). For this reason, SMOs, their subordinates and their organizations, such as NED firms, "will remain closed to their career potential and will not give them the correct insight into their growth and leadership" (Wonnia, 2021, p. 629). To avert this eminent collapse of NED corporate life, it is crucial to explore a number of emergent questions:

Q1. What is the level of leadership succession knowledge and practice among SMOs of NED organizations?

Q2. What accounts for the practice or non-practice of SP by SMOs of NED organizations?

Q3. How does the NED leadership succession management knowledge and practice inform strategic choices made by NED SMOs and subsequent performance of NED organizations?

Q4. How does the NED leadership succession management model create sustainability pathways for NED firms?

A careful exploration of these questions will help determine actual SP knowledge and practice by NED SMOs, strategic choices made same SMOs and the impact of such choices on organizational performance and, therefore, anticipated sustainability of NED corporate life. As explained later in our empirical strategy, SMOs are at the center of this investigation because SP is a strategic human resources management tool available to only such SMOs as chief executive officers (CEOs), managing directors (MDs) and other top management officials or their deputies and other subordinate managers who qualify to replace their superiors in the latter's absence.

2. Leadership development and organizational performance

Organizational leadership determines organizational performance. The effectiveness or otherwise of corporate performance is largely dependent on the caliber of individuals, such as the board of directors, CEOs, MDs and other SMOs responsible for leading such

organizations (McCarroll, 2020; Ryan, 2015). It has been argued that organizational leaders who succeed on their leadership roles must undergo some training both at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels (Day and Dragoni, 2015). This means that, for CEOs, MDs and other SMOs and their deputies (or potential successors) to realize effective organizational leadership, they must undergo both intrapersonal and interpersonal training to help develop their knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) in leading their respective organizations. At the intrapersonal dimension level, development of the SMO's KSAs will focus on human capital, psychological processes, experiential learning and personality of SMOs. The interpersonal KSA development of the SMO, on the other hand, will center on building relationships with followers and other stakeholders. For example, the authors list such components of human capital as the cognitive, meta-cognitive and behavioral skills which they contend (potential) leaders must acquire as they climb the leadership ladder. Similarly, along same leadership pathways, SMOs who want to be successful must prepare themselves psychologically by identifying themselves with the organization for which they work, learn to self-regulate and make good use of experiences from leadership positions previously held.

Thus, with leadership development, the preparation and transfer of both interpersonal and interpersonal KSAs to successor candidates are critical for effective leadership succession management (Chu, 2016; Gamo-Sanchez and Cegarra-Navaaro, 2015; Millar et al., 2016). Clearly, these leadership development activities, or KSAs, constitute the goal of SP and all forward thinking organizations, including NED firms, must recognize this SP imperative. In an earlier study, Day (2000) categorized these leadership development activities as KSAs of "differentiation" and "integration." In this categorization, the author argued that intrapersonal training provided potential successors with KSAs of differentiation because intrapersonal KSAs portrayed attributes that helped distinguish SMOs from other stakeholders; similarly, interpersonal training offered KSAs of integration because these latter set of KSAs helped SMOs socialize or interact with stakeholders. Thus, leadership development, whether intrapersonal or interpersonal, and whether with KSAs of integration or KSAs of differentiation, generates critical human capital (or KSAs), including SP knowledge, necessary for superior organizational performance (Day and Dragoni, 2015; Subramony et al., 2018). Contrary to this SP recognition as a viable resource for effective leadership development and organizational performance, Graham (2018) has reported that NED firms risk folding up due to SP non-practice. Only recently, Wonnia (2021) reviewed literature on current trends in succession management of public universities in Ghana and concluded that the Ghanaian public universities did not follow routine procedures when replacing departing university officials. At the same time, new officials recruited or promoted through other non-SP procedure were found to have inadequate KSAs to effectively deliver on the job. These concerns from the Ghanaian succession management landscape, therefore, raises a number of pertinent questions on the SP situation in NED. For instance, what KSAs are exhibited by NED corporate leaders in a context of SP non-practice? What may have accounted for the transfer or non-transfer of KSAs between SMOs and potential successors in NED firms? What picture of corporate sustainability does the NED SP situations paint? What even is the level of SP knowledge and practice among SMOs of NED firms? How does NED KSAs help distinguish or associate SMOs with other stakeholders? As stated in our introductory section, this study seeks to provide answers to these critical questions.

It is particularly instructive to explore these crucial questions because of a cogent argument that organizations seeking to achieve sustainable competitive advantage must be interested in "strategic and unique combinations of physical, organizational and human capital" (Subramony et al., 2018, p. 287). The purpose of this assertion was to underscore the fact that undermining or dismissing, altogether, the contributions of any of these three organizational resources will not help affected firms make strategic choices and will not, therefore, give the organizations in question any sustainable competitive advantage. This provides adequate grounds for us to explore the kinds of strategic choices made by SMOs

of NED firms and the effect of such choices on performance and sustainability of these NED firms. SP is a strategic human resources (HR) function, and if NED firms do not practice formal leadership succession, it is imperative to uncover the underlying reasons behind such corporate executive defiance.

Besides, in an attempt to emphasize Barney's (2002) definition of the three organizational resources identified in the preceding paragraph, Isenhour (2018, p. 286) provided specific examples of the three organizational resources as "Physical capital – technology, geographic locations, physical assets such as plants and money, access to raw materials etc.; Organizational capital – formal reporting structure, coordinating planning, and organizing systems, internal/external group relationships etc.; and human capital – experience, capabilities, relationships, insight etc." From a resource-based perspective, these examples are inherently inter-related and require strategic combinations to create desired impacts on both leadership development and organizational performance. For instance, it might not be strategic for an organization to commit only to the provision of technological resources at the expense of building expert-level employee experience, capabilities, relationships and insight. This is because technological applications, in themselves, are meaningless unless they are linked to appropriate organizational and human capital (Kavanagh and Johnson, 2018). Thus, a company's decision to purchase a number of computers must be supported by a reporting structure established to facilitate engagement among employees and mediated by appropriate computer applications.

It is important to note, however, that both the computer applications and reporting structure are controlled and managed by human talent, such as a skillful and experienced information technology person, without whom the computers and organizational systems will serve no strategic purpose (Barnabas et al., 2016; Fleming, 2012; Obandam and Ohiorenoya, 2013). In the case of NED firms where SP non-practice is reported, SMOs appear to disregard the human capital component of this framework for leadership development and organization performance, and pragmatic steps, such as the present research, must be taken to protect NED firms against operational shocks (Ritchie, 2020). SP is such an indispensable organizational leadership and performance management tool that all forward thinking institutions – public, private and nonprofit – must endeavor to take advantage of Fadeyi et al. (2019) to prepare potential organizational leaders to readily and ably assume leadership positions whenever such positions become vacant (Donner et al., 2016).

2.1 Succession planning discourse and paradox theory

SP knowledge and practice are critical for providing, among others, talented successors (Asumptha and Mathan, 2016), ensuring corporate sustainability (Rayburn et al., 2016) and in protecting effective leadership regimes (Ritchie, 2020). A study in Nigeria has shown that transport companies survived and greatly improved performance as a result of prudent succession management practices (Onwuka et al., 2017). Barnabas et al. (2016), Fleming (2012), Obandam and Ohiorenoya, (2013) and Rothwell (2005) all uphold a similar viewpoint. Several other previous researchers have touted the pivotal role that SP plays in both specific and general management of organizations. For example, in a study to determine SP factors to consider in executive SP planning in the United Arab Emirates, Suwaidi et al. (2020) observed that SP strategy, organizational culture and opportunities for leadership development were the most important of the factors considered. Oudah et al. (2018) also examine factors that promote family business sustainability and concluded that management strategy, such as SP strategy, accounted for the sustainability or otherwise of family businesses. However, these studies did not move beyond the factors identified to examine the impact of the practice or non-practice of SP on leadership development, strategic choice and corporate sustainability.

Clearly, while the two examples point to the central role of SP in the pursuit of organizational effectiveness, continuity and general well-being, they are not aligned with the dictates of the

paradox theory which offers "perspectives to study the management of persistent and seemingly contradictory demands, goals, interests or perspectives locked in a relationship with each other" (Helvet-Beugels, 2020, p. 213). This means that decision-makers or SMOs need to find a way to manage any competing demands that may arise in the course of their duty (Farjoun, 2016; Schad *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, the essence of the paradox theory is to help organizational leaders such as NED SMOs accept that any competing goals as a workplace reality. Acknowledging the existence of contradictory tendencies will help pave way for managing the paradox appropriately. Two approaches have been proposed to help managers deal with paradoxical situations. One is to manage the opposing forces at the same time (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), and the other is to separate the opposing forces to focus more on one, either temporally or permanently (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). It is, therefore, imperative that an assessment of the NED SP situation is made to determine whether there any opposing interest in the SMO space. Where there is evidence that that the SMO space is paradoxed, it will be appropriate to determine a way to handle the situation to maximize benefits for the NED corporate ecosystem, using one of the two approaches identified.

3. Methods

This study used qualitative methods to design its strategy of inquiry, collect, analyze and interpret data toward the achievement of its research objectives of exploring the SP space of NED firms and how SP practice or otherwise affect both strategic choices made by NED SMOs and sustainability of the NED corporate life. In the world of research, exploratory studies with intellectual and practical goals, such as this one, are best accomplished using qualitative methods of investigation (Maxwell, 2005). Intellectually, the study sought to understand participant SP knowledge, experiences and actions or inactions in a particular NED context. The study was also interested in understanding the process of leadership succession in NED firms to help develop causal explanations for the role of NED SMOs in the practice or non-practice of SP and issues engendered. With respect to practical goals, the researchers sought to provide, through collaborative research (individual and group interviews), results that are appreciated by both study participants and general readership. Maxwell (2005) has argued that as these goals require an inductive, open-ended strategy, qualitative approaches have a "particular advantage in addressing" them (p. 24). This, together with the particularity of the study context and other characteristics of the research lends credence to the choice of qualitative methods for the study (Creswell, 2009).

3.1 Study context

This study is part of a bigger research project that sought to explore leadership succession phenomena in the NED of Ghana. The paper is one of a number of research outcomes arising from the larger research conducted by the authors. The NED was selected based on its potential of becoming one of Ghana's celebrated business hubs as a result of its proximity to business districts of neighboring La Cote D'Ivoire and the presence of some of the oldest organizations in Ghana. The researchers estimated that these older firms would have been operating with some formal structures such as SP in place and that a study to help establish the impact of such leadership succession arrangements in the area will not only serve the people of NED but also the rest of the Western Region and the entire country.

3.2 Research design

This study was exploratory and used qualitative approaches to investigate issues of succession leadership in the NED. Empirical evidence suggests that exploratory studies often lend themselves to qualitative approaches (Fox, 2008). In this study, as issues of succession leadership in the NED have not received any insightful investigation in the past,

the present study sought to unearth in-depth information on succession leadership which only qualitative, as opposed to quantitative methods, can explore (Creswell, 2009). With this approach and design, research participants are offered much opportunity to freely share their experiences, perceptions and realities about the leadership succession issues under investigation (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This kind of research arrangement also offers the researchers to use data enriching techniques such as probes and prompts (Maxwell, 2005) to afford research participants additional space to bring up details that may have been left out in initial or follow-up submissions by the participants. At the end of the data collection period, both the researcher and the participant would have satisfied themselves that information provided is exhaustive enough to help generate credible and insightful findings.

3.3 Sampling technique

Using the purposive sampling method, the researchers recruited a total of 60 study participants from selected NED organizations. First, we obtained a list of 50 registered organizations in the NED. From this list, five organizations were purposively selected for the study, based on age of the organization. To be part of the 5 NED firms selected for the study, the organization needed to be in existence in the District for, at least, 20 years at the time of the research. The reason for this criterion-based selection is that, after two decades of operation, the firm may have realized or even grown beyond the formalization stage of their life cycle where formal structures may have been established (Stewart and Brown, 2009), including succession plans. We, therefore, anticipated receiving rich SP information from study participants from these firms because of the age of their respective organizations. As shown in Table 1, the study participants comprised 11 SMOs and 49 middle management officials of selected NED organizations. For the 11 SMOs, the CEO and the human resource executive of each of the five selected companies, or their deputies, were included. In one firm, the researchers had the opportunity to engage the CEO and two HR professionals, bringing the total number of SMOs to 11. Indeed, the five CEOs and six HR professionals were selected for the lead role they played in strategic decision-making and execution, including SP and organizational sustainability decisions. The involvement of heads of the various human resource departments of affected firms was based on the understanding that these human resource professionals have often been regarded as strategic partners of the CEOs (Subramony et al., 2018) and should have adequate experience and knowledge on whether or not SP was practiced, and how its practice or non-practice informed strategic choices and sustainability of NED firms.

The 49 middle management officials, on the other hand, were composed of 20 departmental heads, 20 secretaries to departmental boards and 9 HR personnel. Although, compared with the SMO group, this second group of 49 mid-level management officials of NED firms were not directly responsible for strategic decisions of their respective organizations, they were included in the study because the various positions they occupied presented them with a high possibility of being present at senior management meetings

Table 1 Distribution of study participants	
Category of participants	*No. of participants*
Firm 1 senior management officials	3
Firm 2 senior management officials	2
Firm 3 senior management officials	2
Firm 4 senior management officials	2
Firm 5 senior management officials	2
Middle management officials from all five firms	49
Total	60

where SP decisions could have been made. It was also estimated that, while some departmental heads may have received some SP training in the course of their duty, it was possible that any of the selected secretaries may have been present either as substantive or acting recorders of meetings where SP decisions were taken and that these secretaries may be willing to share their experiences with the researchers. Besides, Wonnia (2021) has advised that SP planning, execution and evaluation is a system-wide imperative and should not be viewed only as a senior management responsibility. On this score, it was appropriate to include middle management staff in the study.

3.4 Data collection instruments

The researchers used two data collection instruments to gather in-depth information to help complete their research work. The two instruments, interview guide and focus group discussion guide, were used to carry out one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions respectively. Saunders et al. (2012) have advised that the two research tools constitute rich data sources for qualitative studies such as the this paper on SP knowledge and practice in NED organizations and how such SP trend informs organizational performance, strategy progression and sustainability. Each of the two data collection instruments is presented next.

3.4.1 Interview guide. The researchers designed and used one interview guide for the one-on-one conversations with SMOs and HR professionals of NED firms. One interview guide was used to ensure uniformity of content and coverage across interviewee turns. In designing the guide, care was taken not to exclude questions that are critical to meeting the objectives of the study. The questions generally centered on roles and responsibilities of interviewees in their current positions, how they were appointed to such positions and how leadership succession is observed in their respective organizations. Some of the questions bordered on interviewee knowledge on formal leadership succession strategies such as SP and whether or not they were convinced that their individual experiences in terms of SP management in their respective firms met the requirements for formal succession plans. The rest of the questions then sought to illicit interviewee understanding of the role of leadership succession in the strategic pursuit and sustainability of their organizations and the challenges encountered, with or without formal succession management regimes. In all, the interview guide was composed of 15 question items (see Appendix 1) with each item on the guide subject to probes and prompts.

3.4.2 Focus group discussion guide. With the focus group component, the 49 middle managers who accepted to participate in the study were placed into seven focus groups of seven members each. The researchers then led each workshop-styled focus group discussion through participant knowledge, experience and perception of SP practice or non-practice and its impact on strategic choices and sustainability of their respective organizations. As in the case of the one-on-one interview session, the FGD followed a pre-designed discussion guide prepared by the researchers (see Appendix 2). Because the focus group discussion (FGD) was intended to complement information gathered through the one-on-one interview, coverage of the FGD was similar to the one for the interview section. Thus, the questions generally centered on roles and responsibilities of interviewees in their current positions, how they were appointed to such positions and how leadership succession is observed in their respective organizations. Some of the questions bordered on interviewee knowledge on formal leadership succession strategies such as SP and whether or not they were convinced that their individual experiences in terms of SP management in their respective firms met the requirements for formal succession plans. The rest of the questions then sought to illicit interviewee understanding of the role of leadership succession in the strategic pursuit and sustainability of their organizations and the challenges encountered, with or without formal succession management regimes. The

same set of fifteen questions used for the interview part was used for the FGD, though the form of some of the questions in the FGD was modified to suit the context of the discussion.

However, with the FGD segment, participants were allowed to volunteer information one after the other until an agreement or otherwise of the substance of each question was established. This, way, participants had the opportunity to double check submissions made by colleague participants and even offer additional details in support of or against the discussion point in question. Where a question is asked or a scenario is created for discussion and no participant volunteered to contribute, the researchers appointed someone to trigger the discussion. For example, in one FGD, the researchers asked participants to share their experiences on how leadership succession was done. At first, participants were reluctant to speak on the issue because it was about their bosses. The researchers, after re-assuring them of utmost confidentiality, nominated the representative of Company C to help start the conversation. The participant accepted and willingly shared her experience, and this triggered a very exciting and interesting discussion on the matter.

3.5 Data processing and analysis

The data obtained through oral conversations with participants were audiotaped (with the consent of study participants), processed and manually analyzed using a number of steps. Creswell (2009) has underscored the need for qualitative researchers to carefully prepare, organize and interpret qualitative data for the purpose of generating quality meaning from such data. In line with this, these researchers used the following steps in processing and analyzing data collected.

3.5.1 Organization and preparation of data. The researchers used two steps to organize and prepare data collected for deeper analysis. First, we transcribed all audiotaped interviews (one-on-one and FGD), typed out our field notes and arranged the interview transcripts into two packs of 11 face-to-face interview and 7 FGD transcripts. The transcription and separation of the two sets of data and the field notes of the researchers were intended to help facilitate initial analysis as they provided the researchers an opportunity to build a general idea about the data (Maxwell, 2005). Second, the researchers carefully read through the face-to-face and focus group transcripts as well as the field notes. This allowed the researchers to edit out all inaccurate information, including spelling errors and misrepresentation of facts, using the audiotapes and researchers' journals as points of verification. It was also at this time that the researchers reflected on the general idea conceived in the preceding step. In the course of our reflection, we made notes in the margins of the transcripts. The notes generally centered on overall meaning, tone, depth, credibility and presentation of information. Creswell (2009) has advised that these two steps constitute adequate preparation and organization of data for further analysis or coding of textual data. Based on this assurance, the researchers proceeded to the next phase of the data analysis process.

3.5.2 Coding process. With the first two steps of preparatory work accomplished, the researchers used a coding process to generate analytical fragments and ensuing interpretations (Creswell, 2009). In doing so, we adopted Tesch's (1990) framework for manual analysis of qualitative data. The framework prescribes key steps qualitative researchers have to follow when coding qualitative data. The first step is a thorough reading of all interview transcripts while noting down ideas as they occur to the researcher. We took care of this step in the preceding sub-section where we prepared data for analysis including reading and reflecting on transcripts. Second, the framework requires that researchers select one transcript and go through it for underlying meaning. To achieve this, we selected the most descriptive transcript and read it more analytically and made notes of ideas that emerge in the margins of the transcript. Although we could select the least descriptive transcript, the one on top or under the pack of transcripts, we chose the most descriptive because we estimated that such choice was most likely to generate the most

ideas, topics or themes all of which will be needed in subsequent steps in the coding process. We continued the reading of transcripts and making of notes for several interview transcripts. Third, we created a list of all topics and subtopics that emerged from the reading of transcripts and organized similar topics under broader topics, except those that were unique and could not be categorized at this stage. Next, we took the list of topics and abbreviated the major topics and the unique ones as codes which we then assigned to identifiable segments of each transcript. This helped us determine new topics and codes. The fifth step involved finding appropriate phrases or themes which could be used to label the majors topics created. In the course of grouping different components of the interview transcripts under themes that emerged, some themes had to be merged and relabeled as needed. This process continued until three themes were arrived at, which could not be further merged. Sixth, we made a final determination of the three ultimate themes to be used. These themes were SP knowledge, SP as a strategic choice and SP practice and sustainability of NED firms. Then, all data belonging to each of these categories or themes were place under them and qualitative narratives were used to help craft chronological narrations borne out of interpretations of data located under each category. The lessons learned from the interpretation of data were facilitated by the researchers' understanding, issues compared and in relation to available literature and theory (Crewswell, 2007).

4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to assess the level of knowledge and practice of leadership succession by NED organizations to determine how an interplay of such SP knowledge and practice affect strategic choices made by NED SMOs and sustainability of these NED organizations. As the sub-sections below show, results were categorized and presented under three main themes: SP awareness, SP as a strategic choice and SP practice and sustainability of NED firms. It is important to note that all three dimensions of our findings reveal a certain leadership succession paradox which spanned the three thematic areas of our research findings. It is also worth noting that, in all three cases, most NED SMOs demonstrated adequate knowledge for practice of the concepts but, as explained in the remainder of this section, they just did not.

4.1 Succession planning awareness in Nzema East District organizations

Findings of the study revealed that some management officials of NED organizations had knowledge of SP while others did not. The level of SP awareness in NED organizations was determined using findings from senior management and middle management staff of affected organizations. The researchers found that most of senior managers of NED organizations had SP knowledge. However, these SMOs only studied the SP concept in School, from other senior members of their respective organizations, and through training and seminal sessions. The few remaining senior managers of NED organizations had no SP knowledge. Although the majority of NED organizational leaders had a certain level of SP awareness, it is quite worrying that some, albeit few, were unaware of the SP concept. To illustrate the finding that not all leaders of NED organizations are aware of, put in place SP policies and actually learn them, the following excerpt is helpful. It is instructive to note that, although some SMO had considerable work experience in their organization, they only learnt about SP from some senior members of the organization. Thus, through informal conversation with other senior members, this SMO learnt about SP:

> Yes, I am aware of and have a fair idea of Succession Planning; it is a form of strategy that an organization can use to replace its key staff who, for some reason, might leave the organization. When I first joined this organization, I happened to work with some senior members and they occasionally talked of Succession Planning and lamented that the organization did not have one [...] and that is how I got to know about it.

Unlike this SMO, other senior managers of NED firms became aware of the SP concept through trainings and seminars, as reflected in the submission below:

> The first time I fully became aware of the succession planning concept was actually when I was with my former organization. I actually participated in some trainings and seminars that were organized for senior members on employee placement. Most of the trainings and seminars focused on key staff placement and succession management was generally identified as the best possible option for the said placement exercise. And having had the opportunity to work with my current organization, I can say that some of the board meetings have also highlighted the need to plan succession in the organization.

Clearly, The two SMOs have demonstrated that some management members of NED organizations have SP knowledge, although SP is not actually practiced in their organizations. This observation is worrying particularly as the assertions of the two management respondents were supported by many other senior management respondents. In their submissions, the two senior management respondents wished SP were practiced in their respective organizations. This crave for SP education in NED organizations is a landmark indication that although the employee may commit adequate dedication to organizational success, their leaders, whose duty it is to promote such organizational success, fail to do so.

Similarly, middle management staff of NED organizations were asked to share any SP knowledge or experience acquired from their various places of work. Unlike the senior management group where a few SMOs were unaware of SP, majority of the middle management group had no SP knowledge and did not hear of or experience SP in any way. The mid-level managers placed their SP ignorance at the doorstep of their superiors, arguing that if senior management were themselves aware of and practiced SP, such knowledge would definitely trickle down to mid-level management. This is contained in the following excerpt from a participant of a focus group discussion and supported by colleague participants:

> We do not know about succession planning, we are not aware of it and we do not have any idea how it works. If it is the organization's responsibility to inform and educate us on what succession planning is, then I am sorry to disappoint my organization and say that it has not been up to its task in that area of succession planning. Perhaps, most of the people in [senior] management positions in our organization are themselves not aware of succession planning and that is possibly why we also have no idea of it.

Probing further on this level of SP inexperience, participants of another focus group postulated that when key members leave their organizations, senior management often find ways (only known to senior management) to get the departing executive replaced, albeit prolonged delays. They argued that the practice generally resulted in performance gaps, as vacant positions were unable to contribute to productivity for the period of their existence. Although it is understandable that these mid-level managers lacked SP knowledge because they were in non-senior management positions and were, probably, not directly affected by SP decisions, participants went beyond this rhetoric to suggest that senior management is probably uninterested in promoting SP training and development because, in their view, SP practice promotes transparency and accountability in succession management. Thus, organizational leaders seeking to favor specific employees will always find ways to avoid the concept.

On the flip side of the NED SP situation, it is important to point out that, of the SMOs with SP knowledge, only a handful of them had SP policy in their respective organizations. The majority of them did not. Yet, these SMOs with SP knowledge were found to have overtly lamented over the absence of an SP policy in the organizations that they lead and where they have the authority to institute an SP policy. A human resource professional found this attitude of NED senior management to be "hypocritical" as the interviewee contended that

such "paradoxical conceptualization" of SP ought to be expunged from NED senior management space to protect current and future NED firms:

> Sometimes, it is difficult to appreciate certain developments, even if one is part of the decision making process. So, here is the case, you do your best and offer professional advice in support of a robust succession management system, but your advice is subject to the approval or otherwise of a higher authority like the CEO. One thing is that some of these authorities openly laud the importance of good succession management. So, you know they have good understanding of the concept and have the power to lead a well-planned succession regime in their various organizations; but they just do not, sadly!

In this lamentation by an HR Professional, who also serves as a strategic partner of their CEO, it is evident that, although NED CEOs may have SP knowledge and may have been well aware of the importance of SP in the growth and sustainability of NED organizations, somehow, they only feigned interest in the concept. SP knowledge, as ably demonstrated by some NED management officials, generally have paradoxical consequences.

4.2 Succession planning practice as strategic choice in Nzema East District organizations

Beside the varying levels of awareness by both senior management and middle-management members of NED organizations, the researchers also sought to establish whether or not SP was practiced in the selected NED organizations. Two major findings emerged. First, most SMO interviewees with SP knowledge admitted that they did not practice SP in their organizations except in a couple of cases. It emerged that most NED SMOs with SP knowledge did not practice SP mainly because they did not consider SP as a strategic choice. One SMO observed that, although SP is one of many strategic choices available to senior management, physical resources are often prioritized over human capital development. The SMO further explained that, in the current spade of competitive digitization, most corporate investments favor technology and related applications. The interviewees also contended that "other infrastructural investments such as office space, logistical needs, and image branding" are all preferred to a robust leadership succession regime. This position was passionately shared by other senior management staff both with and without SP practice experience. For instance, a CEO with considerable SP practice experience shed more light on this:

> The truth is that many of us [CEOs] are struggling in terms of financial resources. And so, one has to be careful when making decisions that border on choosing between physical, organizational, and human assets. In fact, there is this general assumption that once there are employees, then they must deliver on the job, even without career progression facilities. So, human capital development is often the last to consider when making certain strategic decisions. But I think the reverse is the way to go since human capital is the fuel of all other resources of the firm.

Emphasizing this position, a human resource manager recounted the difficulty encountered each time they have to remind their strategic partners (CEOs) to prioritize leadership development. The HR professional lamented that, in most of the cases, CEOs demonstrated a willingness to invest in human capital but only in principal; practically, NED "corporate investments continue to favor physical assets and procedural improvements. Aren't we being hypocrites, pretentious, and paradox mongers?" This quiz by the interviewee sends a strong signal of how paradoxical NED CEOs have been in their responsibility to treat SP as a viable strategic choice.

A second reason offered for the non-prioritization of SP as a strategic choice was political interference. The SMOs explained that "if a company uses its scarce resources to train a potential successor who is also a politician, for example, the company is likely to lose such investment to political appointment, victimization and imprisonment, or some other form of

political complication." The NED CEO concluded that, for this political reason, some companies are reluctant to invest in potential successors of key position holders in their organizations. Another CEO Interviewee lamented that, sometimes, CEOs are under the direct "watch and control" of a political "godfather." Thus, it is the godfather who decides who must take over from the departing "godchild" executive. The interviewee further disclosed that the successors imposed on CEOs by political actors are generally incompetent and sometimes even without requisite qualifications. In the face of such blatant frustrations, therefore, some CEOs find it more prudent to operate without any SP considerations because it amounts to a mere waste of time. Usually, such political maneuvers are made to be presented as senior management decisions that cannot be contested. Again, from a political front, we are faced with high levels of pretense and contradictions from both the CEO and their godfather politician; the trend of paradoxes, therefore, lingers on.

4.3 Succession planning practice and corporate sustainability

Aside the instances reported in respect of SP awareness and practice and strategic choices made by senior management, including the choice to prioritize impositions of incompetent successors over ethical leadership succession practices, our findings also present a third dimension of the manifestation of leadership succession paradox in NED organizations. It was observed that although SMOs and their assistants largely recognized the role of effective succession management in leveraging sustainability of NED organizations, this recognition actually has little or no relevance for CEOs whose organizations did not practice SP; they were deemed as firms with no sustainability prospects. A middle management official observed that in a corporate culture where training and onboarding of talented successors are largely disregarded, the future of such organizations cannot be guaranteed. As with the first two cases, SMOs engage in contradictory posturing with regard to what they advocate and what they practice. The officer explained further that "the problem is not about what the decision-makers know about sustainability; rather, it is more about the politics surrounding a certain commitment to sustain desirable corporate strategy and its outcomes but actually doing nothing about it." Contrary to this paradoxical behavior, interviewees from the few NED firms with some SP practice were excited about the "huge potential of their organizations to sustain existing leadership strengths" whenever incumbent leaders leave their respective organizations, expectedly or otherwise. To the interviewees, the ability to replace key position holders with competitive successors is a fundamental requirement of corporate sustainability.

5. Discussion and implication

Findings of this study present a number of theoretical and practical implications for SMOs and HR Professionals of NED organizations, in particular, and of other Ghanaian firms, in general. Theoretically, the study draws massive attention to a caliber of NED SMOs who strongly believe that SP plays a cardinal role in bringing about an effective leadership succession regime. Yet, practically, the same NED SMOs deliberately superintended over SP-less succession regimes. It became evident that this paradoxical character, as exhibited by the majority of NED SMOs, was largely fueled by a certain personalization and politicization of the NED SMO space. For NED firms to fully benefit from the strengths of SP adoption, it is important that both NED SMOs and HR professionals consider the following leadership measures:

First, it is the responsibility of NED SMOs to ensure that the organizations they lead become successful through clear and documented work procedures, such as SP. This means that subjecting the leadership succession imperative of NED firms to paradoxical SMO behavior is not an option for the NED SMO. It is incumbent that NED

organizational leaders genuinely deploy established formal organizational processes to nominate, train and onboard deserving leadership successors (Kavanagh and Johnson, 2018; Ryan, 2015). Such leadership commitment spurs much growth, prosperity, competence and a climate of strategic ability (Donner *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, whenever there is a well-planned succession between a leader and a potential leader, there is also stable and consistent conduct of business, adequate motivation and selfless commitment to the accomplishment of corporate goals and objectives (Garman and Tyler, 2016).

It is, therefore, strategically problematic that, in spite of the presence of this theoretical awareness, the majority of NED SMOs did not practice SP, although they exhibited adequate SP KSAs. In a corporate world where succession management is so grossly undermined, current and previous years of strategic accomplishments, and even the entire future of an organization, can easily be ruined. Usually, when formal structures are undermined, covert maneuvers take over and place critical leadership positions in the hands of wrong persons (Onwuka *et al.*, 2017). This is, perhaps, why Graham (2018) suggested that NED firms are likely to fold up for reasons of SP non-practice. This study found that, without succession management, most NED SMOs were able to promote their favorites, or wrong persons, into leadership positions through the lens of a leadership succession paradox. It has been argued that paradoxical tendencies are deliberate in nature (Helvet-Beugels, 2020). As such, it may be difficult for NED SMOs to discontinue their paradoxical behavior on their own. This is where the HR professional's intervention is required. The HR departments of NED firms must put in place strategies to combat SMO paradoxes as these unproductive executive moves constitute a threat to the survival of affected firms. As a first step, the HR departments can advocate for SP adoption by all NED firms, using the success story of the few SP-practicing firms as a push factor. There will certainly be initial resistance from the SMOs, but, with persistence, it might work. The HR professional can also liaise with various labor unions to push for open, transparent and fair succession management, if the first step fails.

Second, it is important to note that whenever vacant leadership positions are filled through succession paradoxes, it is often concluded that such leadership successions are usually initiated for personal and/or political reasons Schad and Bansal (2018) as SP value is often lost to favorites of departing executives even if these favorites are not trained, skilled and competent to take over from their departing "godfathers." This research has shown that personalization and politicization of the NED leadership space fundamentally underlie the ubiquitous prevalence of succession paradoxes among SMOs of NED firms. These SMOs, who manifestly expressed much theoretical enthusiasm toward SP adoption, but with no practical complements, must rethink their leadership strategy to exclude all forms personalization and politicization of the Ghanaian corporate space and related issues engendered. SMOs need to come to the understanding that personalizing SMO responsibility does not only negatively affect the office of the CEO as an individual; it affects the entire organizational system. This often happens when the executing executive finds space to disregard formal organizational procedures, such as the establishment of an SP structure, and to covertly work for self-interest or to the dictates of the personal interests of a superior, family, friend, etc. Eventually, these anti-SP trends trickle down to subordinates who, in turn, cause the entire system to be personalized.

Similarly, our findings show that political interference portrayed much disregard for formal structures and imposed SMO favorites rather than the most qualified and competent on corporate leadership seats. Note that the imposition of political party loyalists as leadership successors is possible because SMOs often succumb to political pressures that are mostly triggered by personalized work environment. This means that if

the SMO space is depersonalized, political interference at the workplace will be drastically reduced or eliminated altogether. Therefore, as business executives of their respective organizations, SMOs need to reorient their minds to be SP-compliant. This is a responsibility on which they can no longer renege. As employee advocate, strategic partner and technical advisor, the HR professional is required to formulate and implement policies to help depersonalize and depoliticize SMO work environment. For example, HR professionals can organize and provide their SMOs with senior management training programs on depersonalization and depoliticization of corporate space. Consequently, any non-SP-compliant leadership succession program in the NED corporate space, particularly if mediated by personal and political considerations, will lose growth, prosperity and sustainability of their organizations to persistent leadership crises (Donner *et al.*, 2016). We have already seen that, due to this outlier management strategy, NED organizations without SP have been struggling to survive. Robust succession management strategies, therefore, constitute a useful tool for disabling any anti-SP crusaders of NED firms, the key architects of the NED leadership succession paradox.

Third, we found that, as a strategic human resource management tool, SP must not be dismissed or even undermined when it comes to prioritization of organizational resources. Yet, this research revealed that NED SMOs preferred providing physical and organizational resources to human capital development, including SP. It is important for SMOs and HR professionals of all SP non-practicing NED firms to recognize that physical resources such as technology, firm location, plants etc. are, in themselves, meaningless unless they are linked to winning employee KSAs (Isenhour, 2018), such as effective succession management. Therefore, a company's present and future talent pool must form the core of its strategic choices. Dismissing or undermining SP as a strategic choice amounts to an outright rejection of this SP imperative. It is intriguing that NED SMOs who were very enthused about SP adoption turned out to be the very SMOs undermining SP. Although this is clearly an area future research could explore, this research has identified such SMO behavior as integral to the succession paradox. This means that if SMOs and HR professionals are able to depersonalize the NED work environment and pave way for SP adoption, succession management will also be upheld as a priority strategic choice.

Finally, SMOs and HR professionals need to appreciate that effective SP regimes ensure continuity of operations, at least, beyond the term of office of the incumbent. Where an organization adopts a robust SP culture, then the general expectation is that effective leadership succession will survive many leadership regimes (Seniwoliba, 2015). Sustainability of an effective SP system is, therefore, a fundamental purpose of the SP debate. With a majority of NED SMOs deliberately not putting to practice their SP knowledge, and not making SP a strategic choice, sustainability of effective corporate activities in the NED is a very fragile one. The underlying reason for this development, as in the preceding instances, is another dose of SMOs feigning interest in and commitment to corporate sustainability while delivering the contrary. What SMOs and HR professionals can do to remedy the SP situation in the NED is not different from the steps outlined in the preceding discussions.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess the level of SP knowledge and practice by SMOs of NED firms and the impact of such SP knowledge and practice on strategic choices made by NED SMOs and eventual sustainability of NED organizations. On SP knowledge and practice, the study revealed that some NED SMOs had SP knowledge, some of whom practiced SP and others did not. For those with SP knowledge and practice, a major lesson for their respective organizations is the mentorship

arrangement SP provides to potential beneficiaries who serve as insurance cover for organizational prosperity and continuity. On the contrary, organizations with no succession arrangements tend to create a leadership succession paradox where, at the expense of a more transparent SP approach and a deafening desire for SP use by NED organizational management, same leaders routinely pave way for favors to associates of the incumbent.

We also undertook to unravel the underlying reasons for the practice and non-practice of SP by NED firms and found that, essentially, ethical leadership, superior performance and sustainability of established competitive advantage characterized the few SP-practicing NED firms. The reverse was the case of the majority of firms that did not practice SP. Nearly all NED firms undermined or dismissed SP and, instead, instituted a paradox of SP practice to personalized and politicized succession leadership. The outcome of this unethical approach was inferior organizational performance, severely constraint sustainability potential and promotion of personal and political interests. In this context, we found that NED SMOs did not invest in mentorship of potential leaders. They preferred investing in physical and organizational resources and not in human capital. These strategic choices placed the future of these NED firms at high risk.

7. Direction for future research

Although ethical leadership succession regimes ensure robustness in growth and sustainability of firms, we found a certain deliberateness or paradoxical tendencies toward the concept. We also found personalization of official assignments, fueled by political associations, to be the causal factors for these anti-SP leaders. Future research should, therefore, focus on strategies to adopt in combatting this ubiquitous personalization and politicization of office space. Also, as a qualitative study, the findings of the study are context specific. It is prudent to replicate the study in other parts of the country and beyond. Future researchers could also use a more generalizable empirical strategy.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide for SMOs of NED firms

1. Could you please tell me about the work you do and how you got the opportunity to work in your present position?

2. Did you receive any form of training prior to assuming your present office? Please, explain your answer.

3. How are key positions in your organization filled and how beneficial is such succession strategy to your organization?

4. Do you know the person who will succeed you at the end of your term of office? How do you know this or why do you not know this?

5. Does your knowledge of who will succeed you or the lack of such knowledge help or hurt the performance of your organization? Please explain your answer.

6. Kindly share your experiences with regard to leadership of your organization. Why do you think your firm is doing well (or not doing well) in this regard?

7. Tell me about succession management. Why does your firm practice (or not practice) succession management?

8. Do you think that all firms should have SP policy and practice? Why do you think so?

9. Do you think that firms that do not practice SP do not have SP knowledge? Please explain your answer.

10. Do you believe that some organizations may have SP knowledge and not practice SP? What could be the possible reasons for such a trend?

11. How are resources available to your organization managed? How do you prioritize these resources whenever you have to do so?

12. Is succession management a prioritized resource? Please explain your answer

13. What role does leadership succession play in shaping the future of your organization?

14. Do you think that your organization is capable of sustaining its performance without formal leadership SP? Please explain your answer.

15. Is there anything else you would like to add or subtract from the information you have just shared with me?

Appendix 2. Focus group discussion guide for mid-level management officials of NED firms

1. In turns, could you please tell us about the work you do and how you got the opportunity to work in your present position?

2. Did you receive any form of training prior to assuming your present office? Please explain your answer.

3. How are key positions in your respective organizations filled and how beneficial is such succession strategy to your organization?

4. Do position holders receive any form of training before they actually assume office? Please explain your answer.

5. Are all key positions in your firms filled the same way as agreed on in 4 above? Explain your answer.

6. Kindly share your experiences with regard to leadership of your organization. Why do you think your firm is doing well (or not doing well) in this regard?

7. Tell us about succession management. Does your firm practice (or not practice) succession management? Why, or why not?

8. Do you think that all firms should have SP policy and practice? Why do you think so?

9. Do you think that firms that do not practice SP do not have SP knowledge? Please explain your answer.

10. Do you believe that some organizations may have SP knowledge and not practice SP? What could be the possible reasons for such a trend?

11. How are resources available to your organization managed? How do you prioritize these resources whenever you have to do so?

12. Is succession management a prioritized resource? Please explain your answer

13. What role does leadership succession play in shaping the future of your organization?

14. Do you think that your organization is capable of sustaining its performance without formal leadership SP? Please explain your answer.

15. Is there anything else you would like to add or subtract from the information you have just shared with me?

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