

Achieving research excellence Zimbabwean universities: A review based on the eight anchor elements characterising excellent companies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of achieving quality university research and how the research contributes to the success of industry and commerce in Zimbabwe. The research boards in universities are under stress due to limited resources and budgetary constraints. There are eight anchor elements that characterize most successful companies in United States of America that can be used as a framework of achieving research breakthrough in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. Being stakeholder driven institutions of, the issue underpins the importance of being more closer to the customers in so far as research excellence can be achieved. The author further seeks to add a ninth anchor element, leadership which is the umbilical cord which houses the 8 anchor elements that characterise companies that have achieved breakthrough in business strategies. Lastly, the author assesses the importance of magnetic leadership for achieving research breakthrough in universities.

Key words: Research excellence, universities, Zimbabwe, anchor elements, excellent companies.

Introduction

The economic hardships that bedeviled Zimbabwe in the last decade coupled with shortages of foreign currency, mass exodus in terms of skills, the massification of education in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe and the world recession have had a devastating impact on

the ability of these institutions to procure and apply the modern Information technologies against the traditional methods of conducting research in Zimbabwe. A vibrant and effective research thrust in institutions of higher learning will not only benefit the institutions of higher learning alone as it is one of their core business, but also industry and commerce. University research is important as it generates modern and cost effective research methods for the benefit of industry and commerce. Synergies with regional and international research institutions of higher learning assist in formulating strategies to deal with the emerging paradigm in the higher education sector and, the masification of education in the afore said institutions. It also helps in cross pollination of research ideas regionally and internationally thus bringing the much needed modern technology for research purposes and to fund new research projects. Most institutions of higher learning notably state universities are underfunded by the government, hence the need for the afore-mentioned linkages to achieve these noble research ideas.

Peters and Waterman(1982), drew up 8 attributes of excellent companies in the United States and this paper attempts to apply these in institutions of higher learning, particularly state universities in Zimbabwe. The ninth anchor element on leadership is added to permeate all the eight attributes and its infusion into the review is deliberately done to avoid repetition and to emphasize leadership importance in research breakthroughs and the modern leadership dynamics (Nickel 1988).

The eight anchor element review

This review is based on the 8 anchor elements that underpin best run companies in United states of America and they will be applied in Zimbabwe as follows:

A Bias for Action.

Societies are at hyper speed in terms of change so should be companies, research institutions and many others to keep up with the pace Tofler

and Tofler, 1993). Peters and Waterman (1982) describe various ways used by excellent companies of getting on with it. These relate to action-oriented programs based on clearly stated objectives. These authors postulate that there is need to limit stated objectives to a few at a time and this applies to research programs at institutions of higher learning. It is imperative that research boards at universities in Zimbabwe define clear and concise objectives and set priorities. The research boards should answer the following questions if their research goals are to be set. What is our target market? What are the market's benefits?

Action oriented research institutes and boards take advantage of organizational fluidity in terms of communication and research at universities or institutions of higher learning is no longer a privilege of the academic staff alone but also for non academic staff for the simple reason that both constituencies deal much more closely with the customers almost on daily basis and both constituencies can translate the customer's voice into the language of the institutions under study. Research institutes and boards at institutions of higher learning must have inspirational and vision centred leaders who instill a deep sense of urgency to the research process. Newman (1997) supports the above by observing that a great leader has a vision, wisdom, courage and inspirational power. Continuous research on modules relevant to the new dictates of the industry and commerce and technological breakthroughs in coming up with simpler ways for example effective lecture delivery depend on the results of these researches. As leaders there is need to allow experimentation in research laboratories even tolerating failure for breakthrough products and services come from such endeavors. Principal officers in Universities and research directors need to support by practicing management by wandering about as a way also to improve communication, support and encouraging innovation. This means getting out of their offices and go into the research laboratories and research fields, to get the real feel of what is happening out in the research laboratories and fields. In this case, the research fields are the industries that have an anchor relationship with the universities under study.

Close to the customer

Excellent companies learn from the people they serve and spend more time listening to them talking so as to come up with customer driven innovations. In the case of research in institutions of higher learning, our products are the university graduates and the users are people in the industry and commerce who will translate the theoretical aspects imparted to the graduates to practical business aspects. Feedback from customers on what they want underpins the importance of a symbiosis type of relationship with the industry. Research budgets are never enough; links with the industry with the view for funding researches is paramount in this era of continuous breakthroughs in research and development. Universities need to set up research institutes manned by research fellows and funded by commerce and industry through carrying out researches on their behalf for a fee. Flexible shopping of modules from other departments, should be more than encouraged to adequately equip other degrees to meet the dictates of change in the industry.

The research institutes must embrace what Piercy (2000) says “ market let strategic change”, that is going to the market rather than marketing. By going to the market, Piercy (2000) says that you will have hands on experience on the applied research needs of the industry and they translate these needs into the language of the universities, hence directly solving the real problems of the industry.

Autonomy and Entrepreneurship

Pfeffer (1990) postulates that there is need to achieve breakthroughs in our thinking in terms of innovation. The development of new products that are relevant to the needs of the industry is of paramount importance. Creativity and innovativeness are key elements in research hence, research boards alone at institutions of higher learning can no longer enjoy the preserve they used to enjoy in yester years but they should create enabling environment for innovations by project mavericks. Edward Schon quoted by Peters and Waterman (1995:200) remarked “ the new idea either finds a champion or dies ... no ordinary involvement with a new idea provides the energy required to cope with the indifference and resistance that major technological change provokes.” Levitt again

quoted by Peters and Waterman (1995:206) says "...advocates often fail to distinguish between creativity and innovation. Creativity is thinking up new things, innovation is doing new things... a powerful new idea can kick around unused in the firm for years, not because its merits are not recognized but because nobody has assumed the responsibility for converting it from words into action." Ideas are useless unless used and the proof of their value is only in their implementation.

Peters and Waterman (1995) describe the product champion as an innovator who (when conducive environment exists) comes forward sticks out of the growing crowds of "look alikes" even if this involved indulging in "paranoia". The maverick is above all, pragmatic, one who grabs onto someone's theoretical construct if necessary and bull headedly pushes it to fruition. Quinn quoted by Nickel (1988) says that the champion is obnoxious, impatient, egotistic and a bit irrational in organizational terms. Through innovative research and pace setting trends, some institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe have broken down the rules of conventional wisdom by introducing entrepreneurship through work related learning where students are taught entrepreneurial skills and come up with their own breakthrough projects whilst still conditioned in the real work environment for one year. They have taken also a robust approach in introducing innovative programmes such as visiting school, parallel, block release, weekend schools among others to cater for the massification of education in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. They have also gone a step further by making a revolutionary abandonment of information technology (IT) programmes like data ease to Changamire IT systems developed by some universities "Prima Donas" who have turned their workshops and laboratories into innovation centres. The system in brief harmonizes student enrolment, students record keeping and management, examinations management and processing through the internet and student results published through e-learning accounts.

The author's views are that, for the above to materialize, the corporate culture must be a tool for innovation. The power of beliefs determines how one responds to life's numerous challenges. He goes on to say that the reason one person sees an opportunity out of a disaster and another

adversity from the same scenario is explained by the nature of the personal belief system each person is subjected to. Management's role is not to challenge the systems directly but to create an empowering belief statement that will empower, energize and activate everyone in the organizations through explosive vision, mission statements and core values.

Productivity through people

Breakthrough in research management comes down basically to the care of the institutional researchers by providing them with all the tools, equipment and resources necessary to carry out their research, for the quality and productivity of these prima donas determines the effectiveness of research institution.(Peters and Waterman,1995). Peters and Waterman (1995) go a step further to stress the importance of genuine respect for all employees (that is both academic and non-academic) and treating the frontier as the springboard for quality and productivity gains. Excellent institutions are stakeholder driven and the research output that is the product or service that helps solve industry problems is created by people. Pfeffer (1990) postulates that competitive advantage is through people and to achieve productivity through people there is need for respect, trust, meaning excellence and positive reinforcement. These are the harbingers of motivation. Respect and trust are two sides of the same coin, that treating people as adults, as partners, as co-creators of value with dignity and recognizing each person's individuality, meaning caring about the individual and caring means being a good listener. The respect is not about mollycoddling type of respect but tough-minded respect for researchers who are willing to be trained in new research methodologies and grant researcher the practical autonomy to stick out and contribute directly to the job at hand. Research executives do not have time to do what is expected of them but concern for individuals is sufficiently important, they should spare some of their time for this out of their busy schedules.

Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that research directors have regular face to face contacts with staff in an unhurried manner and that each person is given time to discuss whatever he/she wishes including accomplishments, future plans, constraints to getting the research done and complaints about the research administration and personal problems.

Peters and Waterman (1995) say that striving for excellence is both a means and an end. Achieving excellence requires strong motivation and pride in doing a good job is in itself an harbinger of motivation. Excellent research institutions give people pride in what they do by recognizing their efforts through incentives and publishing their research breakthroughs.(For example the 25% for writer and 75% university and publisher publication royalties if one publishes with AMADI press in Swaziland). Institutional leaders must therefore learn to take every opportunity to give praise where it is due and continuously reinforce this notion. Criticism is also necessary but the right to make negative comments is earned by seeking every legitimate opportunity to point out the positive actions.

Hands on Value Driven

Philips and Kennedy quoted by Peters and Waterman (1995:279) remarked that "Tough-minded managers rarely pay attention to the value system of an organization. Values are not hard like organizational structures."

Excellent companies are clear about what they stand for, they are dynamic, visionary and look into the future and create exciting environments through personal attention, persistence and direct intervention far down the line. They take the value shaping process seriously and spend time 'lavishly' inculcating these values into employees. Institutional leaders primarily are experts in promotion and protection of values. Leadership fails when it concentrates on sheer survival but institutional survival if properly understood is a matter of maintaining values and distinctive corporate identity. The former US president Henry Kissinger stressed that the task of a leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been by invoking an alchemy of great vision. To buttress Henry Kissinger's notion, John Steward quoted by Peters and Waterman (1995) remarked that if you want to know a good company's shared values, just look at their vision, mission statement and their annual reports, they make clear what they are proud of and what they value.

Institutional research underpins the importance why these institutions of higher learning exist. They should be selling solutions to industry and commerce problems by producing enterprising graduates that are relevant to the needs of the industry. Producing breakthrough thinkers who are capable of applying knowledge obtained from their previous higher learning institutions to the ever-changing business environment.

Leaders communicate their vision by personal contact. They make themselves highly visible and invigorate their efforts by putting in place mechanisms where by all the top team share the same values and zeal to spread it throughout the institutions(Peters and Waterman,1995).

The specific content of the dominant beliefs of excellent companies include basic values such as:-

- A belief of being the best institution in terms of research.
- A belief in the importance of the details of execution, the bolts and nuts of doing the job well.
- A belief in the importance of people as individuals
- A belief in superior and quality research
- A belief that most institutional members (in this case both academic and non academic) should be innovators and conversely the management's willingness to support failure.

Stick to the Knitting

Excellent companies limit their activities and expertise to the kind of business they know best, in which they have experience and developed sustainable competitive advantage. One of the greatest weaknesses observed in institutions of higher learning is that they try to do too many things with limited resources and there is need to set priorities right. Universities should stick to their knitting that is concentration on selling knowledge and research which are directly related to the needs of their industries. Work related learning is now a priority where visibility of research directors could be seen by wandering about companies in search of feedback from 'attached' students thereby translating the needs of the

industry into the language of the research boards. Work related learning supervisors from these institutions of higher learning should also be given an added mandate to find out the gaps between theory and practical application and also researching from the industry on the new and emerging trends in the fields of learning so that they can craft programmes and modules that address the new order.

Simple Form Lean Staff

In formal matrix structures, people sometimes are not sure to whom they should report and why. The organization gets paralyzed because the structure not only does not make priorities clear, it automatically dilutes them.

Peters and Waterman (1995) point out that many of the excellent companies have fewer administrative layers than their less successful counterparts. Simple rather than complex organizational structures are advocated. Minimizing management levels and avoiding overly formal structures have special importance in research institutions, It is important to keep few layers between top management and individual researchers and the latter must have direct access to top management. Whilst universities are run on committees, the research committee may not appraise CEOs of universities on what is really going on in research laboratories at their institutions rather the researchers must know that the institutional heads are aware of what they are doing and are appreciative of their research work, through vice chancellors' research updates, research board minutes among others.

The institutions' management must be able to appraise councils of their universities, industry, donor world and government officials with personal knowledge of an enthusiasm about the ongoing researches and the gaps they aim to bridge. This requires management's commitment to personally visit faculty , departmental and field mini research centers and laboratories well coordinated by research boards, to lead and to respond to reports by the researchers. This direct involvement and participation, knowledge and communication is often impossible by complicated organizational structures and rigid administrative procedures.

Simultaneous, Loose Tight Principle

This is a summary of pertinent points made earlier and to highlight the apparent contradiction in the fact that successful companies exhibit at the same time, firm's central direction and maximum individual autonomy. This contradiction is however overcome by the shared value systems in excellent companies, that is, although people orientation and individual contributions result in flexible and profitable relationships, discipline is strict when it comes to core values of the organization. Similarly in research institutions, there is need for autonomy and decentralized decision making systems which are essential to a creative atmosphere and still maintain adequate control around central priorities, strategy and philosophies of the institutions. This could be achieved through research boards, research committees, faculty and departmental research committees. Management needs to tolerate individualistic behaviors, so important to attracting, keeping and motivating the research prima donas as long as it does not conflict with the objectives of the organization.

The simultaneous loose tight principle applies very well in research where the practice of setting clear research objectives and priorities and checking that research activities are relate to set priorities, but leaving the specifics to the judgment of the individual researchers. The researchers are encouraged to project their planned research activities in advance and are given free space to conduct a dynamic research program as one set of results points the direction to the next research based on solution after next, while working within the clearly stated philosophy and strategy of the institution and the respective research activity.

Conclusion

Research breakthroughs can be achieved if the institutions of higher learning understudy have the bias for action when there are sudden changes in the environments and giving an empowered and respected researcher the autonomy to innovate and strategize within the confines of organizational value systems and come up with customer based innovations, is the only way of making breakthroughs in terms of research

at universities. Leadership should be inspirational and build adaptive structures to cope with dictates of change.

The paper is thought provoking and invites further discussion on how to continuously achieve research excellence in universities in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the industry is challenged to be proactive and fund research that provides solutions to the problems they face in the industry.

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