Leadership Excellence in Public Libraries

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Abstract

The paper examines Leadership Excellence as a concept, generally. This concept is then applied to the public library system. The variables and competences of leadership excellence in public libraries are identified and analyzed. As a practical demonstration of the concept, the public library of Ghana is used as a case study.

Keywords: Leadership Excellence/ Public Libraries/Ghana/Case study

Introduction

Leadership is a pervasive social phenomenon. Even on a remote island or desert where two or more people are stranded a leader is likely to emerge. In Africa, for instance, where more than two people settle in a place there will always emerge a chief (Togbe, Nana, Mantse) and, for that matter, a leader. The essence and aim of leadership excellence are to ensure survival, continuity and progress. It is the sine qua non for achieving corporate or group objectives in a most systematic, orderly, practical, efficient, pragmatic and effective manner.

Every organization worth its salt must have a well articulated policy, vision and mission. These days there is also talk about core values. An organization without a vision or mission is like a traveler who does not know where he is coming from; where he is; and where he is going. In other words, he has lost his way (Ref: Oliver Goldsmith: She Stoops to conquer). The fate of a visionless and mission less organization could even be more dire. Its existence could be nasty, brutish and short! (Ref. Locke’s state of nature). It is the duty of leadership, using its available resources, especially its human resources, to actualize this policy, vision and mission. Visions and missions are ideals or concepts that are not always easy to attain. Rather, they inspire and provide a road map for the organization. It is the duty of leadership to translate them into visible or tangible forms as much as possible.

The ability or competency of leadership to translate a corporate policy, vision and mission into tangible results for all to see and appreciate, determines the categorization into which it is placed, be it ordinary, good or excellent. But, whatever it is, leadership excellence must demonstrate diligence in abundance which, in turn, must be driven by responsive
political will from above, in this case the government of the day. From experience, my experience, a library may have the best vision, mission, policy or core values but if there is no responsive political will to drive them they will die at birth.

A public library, like any other societal organization, ought to have a vision, mission, implementable policy and, indeed, core values. When these are efficiently and effectively translated into reality or achievable results, then we can safely talk about leadership excellence. Note that, all along, the emphasis has been on leadership and not necessarily the leader. This is because in any organization and, for that matter, public libraries, leadership is diverse albeit synchronized. Synergy is the watch word here! In Ghanaian parlance we say it is not one man affair or show. Ultimately, Leadership is a shared responsibility. Additionally, every organization, including the public library, that wants to attain leadership excellence must maintain corporate esprit de corps and pursue a vigorous staff development, training and continuing education programme.

The Case of Ghana

In Ghana, and this is a truism in some other places, the Librarian or the chief executive of the public library alone does not constitute leadership. He only forms part of it even though he is the pilot. In fact, the leadership organogram of the public library in Ghana is well defined. It is a hierarchical linear structure starting from the President (Government), represented by the Ministry of Education. The Constitution of Ghana makes the President the appointing authority. It is he who, invariably, formulates the public library policy. The structure then goes down to the Board of Directors, which represents the government. The Board advises government on policy matters, serves as an administrative interface between the library and government, and above all, helps the library to implement its stated functions. There is then the Executive Director and his staff who handle the day to day management of the public library.

In Ghana, the structure, objectives and functions of the public library are clearly incorporated into the Ghana Library Board Act of 1949, amended in 1952, 1956, 1970 and revised as Ghana Library Authority Act in 2008. The library derives its powers and existence from this Act. This Act makes the Public library system a centralized bureaucratic monolith with its headquarters in Accra. This, in my view, is an archaic public library concept.

This centralized control system had its place and relevance in the 1950/60’s when President Nkrumah devoted adequate funding to the public library, held it in very high esteem and regarded it as a flagship of nationhood. To demonstrate the value he attached to the public library, he gave its headquarters a befitting prime location contiguous to the Supreme Court, Bank of Ghana and the Parliament of Ghana. Current exigencies and economic realities of today call for the public library to be democratized and decentralized to local authorities or governments. Most of America and Europe, including Britain which introduced public librarianship to Ghana, have long done so. There are more than 200 District Assemblies in Ghana. Can the central government afford to build District Libraries for every District in Ghana and successfully manage them from the centre?
Another minus for the existing public library system is that it has rivaled and delayed the establishment of a National Library of Ghana, fifty-eight years after independence. Ghana urgently needs a National Library that will give leadership and coordinated direction to libraries in Ghana. (Ref. Kosi Kedem. The National Library Concept and its Relevance to Library Services in Ghana. Legon, 1988. MPhil Thesis)

Vision, Mission and Function of the Ghana Public Library Service

Vision:
The Vision of the Ghana Library Authority is to establish libraries throughout the country so that no person will have to walk more than eight (8) kilometers to have access to modern well equipped and well stocked libraries with adequate staff.

Mission:
The Mission of Ghana Library Authority is to provide a comprehensive public library service that would assist in cultivating a lifelong reading habit among the populace, with the objective of ensuring the development of individual’s social and intellectual capabilities, and the creation of a well-informed society for national development.

Function:
The function of the Authority are:

a. Establish, equip, manage and maintain public libraries in Ghana
b. Advise on the development of library services in Ghana
c. Encourage the use of existing library services in Ghana, and
d. Regulate the use of any library under the management of the Authority

Do the vision, mission and function of the Ghana Library Authority appear too ambitious and unattainable? They may appear to pose a formidable challenge even to the best of leadership and over-stretched its ability, capacity and competence to perform. Public Library Leadership Excellence in this context, especially in this era of economic hardship and challenges, will be extremely difficult to establish.

The Public Library Leadership Excellence Curve in Ghana

1. The golden age of leadership excellence

The Public library situation in Ghana between 1950 and 1965 was robust, inspiring and invigorating. It was fortunate to have President Nkrumah and Miss E.J.A Evans, first Director of Ghana Library Board. The partnership and understanding between the two were amazing and highly productive. They were strongly supported by a hard core of dedicated well trained professional/scholarly public librarians. (Ref. E.J.A. Evans. A Tropical Library Service: The Story of Ghana’s Libraries). Support also came from the
British Council, Carnegie and public spirited persons like Bishop Aglionby, credited to have initiated the public library idea in Ghana.

The unprecedented success story of public librarianship was made possible by adequate funding, inspiration, foresight and responsive political will, from government. This was coupled with strong leadership, professionalism, dedication and high staff morale, from the library management. This symbiotic relationship was necessary and critical for the effective operation of a public library system whose services to its clientele were designed to be totally free. You may call the period of Nkrumah and Evans the age of enlightenment or, if you like, the golden age of public librarianship and you are spot on. I dare say, sadly, that Ghana may never experience such a buoyant, vibrant public library scene again. Prove me wrong! This exceptional nostalgic period of public library development exhibited leadership excellence in abundance. Don’t forget that the national library of Ghana idea was also conceived during this period. And had it not been for that pernicious 1966 coup, it would have been implemented with the George Padmore Library as its nucleus. Regrettably, successive governments since 1966 have not been able to deliver it. The conception lingers and Ghanaians patiently await its delivery.

2. The nadir of leadership excellence.

The period between 1966 to date marks the decline, neglect and stagnation of public librarianship. It has brought in its wake many leadership challenges and constraints. The fortunes of the public library have been reduced to a sorry state. The public library is a pale shadow or an apology of what it used to be in the 1950/60’s. It is now an orphan. It appears to me that successive governments of Ghana since 1966 are confused and do not know what to do with the public library; that is whether to maintain or abolish it. These days, governments do not even pretend to pay lip service to its development! In the process they have just allowed it to hang in there!

Post 1966 governments have been accused for being highly unresponsive and insensitive to the needs of the public library. The agency has been under-funded and under-staffed. At a certain time, for seven (7) years, there was no Board of Directors. And at another time, for thirteen (13) years or more, there was no substantive Executive Director. The public library has not been able to keep pace with modern public librarianship. Most critically, the new ICT revolution seems to have eluded it. I find it extremely difficult to accept that government could consider it necessary to procure foreign loans to run school feeding programmes, provide free school uniforms and bags but considers it a taboo to source funds to build and run efficient public libraries mandated by law to promote reading and lifelong learning!

GETFUND has attempted a rescue. Even though these efforts are appreciated, it must also be admitted that they are fraught with irregular late disbursement of funds with uncertainties. In such an environment of uncertainty and neglect who has the courage to talk about leadership excellence in the public library system of Ghana? I am sorry; you are not likely to find it no matter how hard you search. To me, this period of public library
development could best and appropriately be described as the age of neglect, frustration and stagnation. If you like, call it the nadir of leadership excellence. You can quote me!

3. **Glimmer of hope?**

The Board of the Authority was restored in 2009 after seven years in hibernation. The problems faced by the public library are myriad. However, the Board and Management are working hard to salvage the situation. In 2014 a new substantive Executive Director was appointed after the position remained vacant for thirteen years. We look forward to the passage of the new Ghana Public Libraries Services Bill into an act that will make possible the establishment of a national library and also decentralize public libraries to District Assemblies.

The Board has also sought and obtained critical interventions from GIFEC, SSNIT, Huawei, EiFL, Books for Africa and MTN. GIFEC, for instance, is helping with mobile library service, internet connectivity and continuing education. SSNIT has agreed to build a national children and mobile library for the Authority.

The Board has realized that the public library has a lot of goodwill from the public. Instead of depending on unavailable government funding it has decided to explore and exploit this public will. It has, therefore, decided to hold a stakeholders’ meeting in June to discuss funding for public libraries in Ghana. Admittedly, it has not been all “dum” “dum” but, somehow, there is a glimmer of hope for the public libraries if public spirited individuals and corporate bodies continue to help.

**Evaluation and Conclusion**

Public library modernization and ICT revolution are here with us. But the public library in Ghana is yet to take full advantage of them. It seems to me that post 1966 governments of Ghana do not fully appreciate the importance of public libraries for personal and national development. The challenges faced by the public library in Ghana are purely man made and they are multifaceted. They range from governmental neglect, underfunding, inadequate training and continuing education, under-staffing, poor infrastructure development, low staff morale to inadequate access to the internet and non availability of suitable reading materials.

Governments since 1966 have not given the public library much thought or any appreciable attention and have, therefore, not made any systematic interventions or investments in it. There is a serious decline, and in some places stagnation, in the provision of library services. In fact, the whole public library system is struggling to survive. Its continuous survival is only made possible by the strong solid foundation laid by President Nkrumah.

The irony is that the most pronounced stages of decline, neglect and stagnation have happened under the watch of those who should have known better. I do here refer to academic and intellectual giants like Prof. Busia, Dr Limann and Prof. Mills who were, at
one time or another, heads of state of Ghana. So what went wrong? As it were, one can certainly talk about the existence of Leadership Excellence in public libraries of Ghana in 1950/60’s, when the public library system of Ghana was the pride and model for other African states. I have serious doubts about its existence at the present time.