

Leadership Development in Ethiopia: Practices, Challenges, and Way Forward

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Abstract

Leadership development is crucial for institutions as it directly impacts their effectiveness, accountability, and ability to serve the community. Various internal and external challenges can hinder effective leadership development within institutions in Ethiopia. In line with facts, the article aims to examine the practices and evaluate the challenges of leadership development in Ethiopian public institutions, thereby recommending ways to enhance effective leadership development for the overall effectiveness of these institutions through the review of the latest empirical evidence. Accordingly, the findings of the review indicate that leadership training programs are not demand-driven, and political affiliations heavily influence recruitment processes for leadership positions rather than merit. This undermines the readiness and interest of potential candidates, resulting in the selection of unqualified leaders. Besides, the results also indicate the existence of a fragile institutional framework, deficiencies in the education system, poor coordination among stakeholders, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient support and mentorship. In most instances, outdated teaching methods that focus on rote memorization rather than creative thinking and innovation are employed. On the positive, there is a growing trend toward self-directed learning, providing a cost-effective means of professional development. To achieve effective leadership development within organizations and mitigate the identified challenges, periodically conducting needs assessments is vital for aligning leadership development with organizational objectives and aspirations. Additionally, selecting appropriate candidates for leadership programs as well as ensuring top management's commitment to providing resources, and integrating leadership development with organizational strategy are essential. Moreover, Ethiopia's leadership development efforts should be culturally contextualized and aligned with the nation's socio-political realities to achieve meaningful results.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership Development, Practices, Challenges, Way Forward, Ethiopia

Introduction and Justification

High-performing organizations are built through effort; they do not occur by chance. Creating and maintaining superior performance requires the attention, time, and support of leaders as they recruit, train, retain, and reward the leadership teams within their organizations (Longenecker & Insch, 2018; Banda, 2022). Additionally, human capital with diverse disciplines is the most important resource through which organizations achieve their goals. From this perspective, leadership processes help mobilize existing human resources. Thus, effective leadership practices enable greater participation from the entire workforce and can positively influence individuals and, ultimately, organizational performance (Edge, 2022; Nahak & Ellitan, 2022).

Today's organizations face numerous challenges and opportunities, necessitating leaders who can effectively address problems and leverage available opportunities to achieve organizational goals (Geerts, et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the importance of leadership development (Chigudu, et al., 2018; Boaden, 2006). Agulles & Prats (2012) emphasize that managing the complexities of modern organizations requires both well-trained expertise and strong leadership.

Effective leadership development is, therefore, crucial for the growth and success of any institution. It is defined as an organization's effort to enhance the collective leadership capabilities of its employees through engagement in leadership programs (Maheshwari & Yadav, 2019). According to Amagoh (2009), leadership development involves planned and systematic efforts to improve the quality of leadership. Furthermore, Elkington et al. (2017) state that leadership development aims to foster an organizational culture that supports and leverages employees' capacity to emerge as leaders.

Changes in the environment - technological, political, and social - are inevitable and have increased the demand for effective leadership within organizations. In today's competitive landscape, all organizations need to develop strong leadership not only to survive but also to thrive. Effective leaders are crucial for promoting innovation,

adapting to changing conditions, and driving high-performance (Amagoh, 2009). These factors underscore the growing importance of leadership development in both public and private institutions.

There is a strong positive relationship between institutional performance and effective leadership. (Wang & Hackett, 2023; Bedi & Schat, 2022; Crossan, et al., 2021; Gupta & Singh, 2023; Luu, 2022) A meta-analysis examined data from multiple organizations and found that transformational leadership significantly impacts organizational performance (Wang & Hackett, 2023). The study highlighted that leaders who inspire and intellectually stimulate their employees contribute to higher levels of innovation and overall performance. Effective leaders positively influence the work environment by inspiring and motivating employees to embrace change, foster creativity, and innovate beyond their perceived limits (Kebede & Lemi, 2020).

Strategic leadership competencies, such as adaptability and vision, are crucial for organizational learning and performance. Effective leaders facilitate knowledge sharing and adaptability, leading to better decision-making and competitive advantage (Crossan, et al., 2021). Organizations investing in leadership development programs see a significant return in institutional performance. Effective leadership development was linked to improved strategic alignment and operational efficiency (McCauley & Palus, 2023). Empirical evidence also shows that institutions led by competent leaders were better able to navigate challenges, maintain performance levels, and recover more quickly post-crisis (Bundy, et al., 2021).

Leadership development has become a critical investment for organizations worldwide, as effective leadership is essential for navigating today's complex business environments. As a result, organizations are increasingly investing in leadership development programs, recognizing their importance for organizational success. Recent empirical evidence supports this trend, showing that these programs not only help in developing leadership skills but also improve organizational outcomes. For example, studies have shown that leadership training has a moderate positive impact on various organizational measures, including employee performance, team cohesion, and productivity. Furthermore, leadership development is particularly crucial in preparing leaders to handle contemporary challenges like digital transformation, remote work, and evolving market demands (Born & Yemiscigil, 2024). Organizations are taking further steps by partnering with leadership educators, business schools, and other respected institutions to enhance their staff's leadership capabilities (Born, et al., 2022; Born & Yemiscigil, 2024). Elkington et al. (2017) noted that large companies in America have invested billions of dollars in leadership and leadership development.

Well-designed leadership development programs enhance leaders' capabilities, enabling them to adapt to dynamic environments, manage change proactively, and leverage human and social capital to drive organizational success (Day, 2001). This era is marked by uncertainty, volatility, and complexity, which necessitates capable leadership. Factors such as globalization, technological changes, crises, competition, innovation, a scarcity of expertise in the market, and the need for rapid customer response compel leaders to reconsider and improve their approaches. These challenges underscore the importance of leadership development, which equips leaders to effectively address these demands (Hartley & Martin, 2010). In many countries, organizations struggle to fill leadership vacancies with qualified external candidates due to anticipated skill shortages (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). Consequently, organizations are increasingly compelled to focus on developing leadership skills internally, as this is vital for long-term success (Spreitzer, 2006).

Research on leadership development has been limited, primarily attracting the interest of human resources practitioners and consultants rather than scholars. Despite the Ethiopian government's commitment to improving leadership within public service sectors to transform organizations and the nation, significant leadership challenges remain unresolved. The "Pathway to Prosperity Ten-Year Perspective Development Plan (2021–2030)" highlights critical failures in the economy, such as inadequate service provision, weak institutional capacity, and slow institutional change. These issues emphasize the necessity for a focused study on leadership development. To foster development and modernization, it is crucial to critically evaluate current leadership practices, identify challenges, and enhance education and training programs to effectively prepare for diverse missions.

In cognizant of this fact, the review is aimed at establishing challenges affecting effective leadership development in Ethiopian institutions through a review of pertinent literature and thereby suggesting a viable way forward aimed at addressing the challenge and ultimately developing forward-looking, pragmatic, and visionary leaders that can able to properly contribute towards Ethiopia's aspiration of realizing prosperity.

Leadership Development Practices in Ethiopia

Organizations implement a variety of leadership development practices to enhance their leaders' skills and effectiveness. According to McCauley et al. (2004), organizations can employ methods such as multifactor feedback, action learning, coaching, mentoring, and experience sharing to improve leadership behaviors. Mekuria (2018) states that the leadership development process involves transforming leadership behaviors - such as

actions, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes - through formal and informal learning programs to align with institutional goals. This process includes various methods, systems, styles, and policies designed to enhance leadership competencies within organizations. Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni (2020) identified several types of leadership development methods, including 360-degree feedback, executive coaching, job assignments, action learning, job rotation, networking, and mentoring. Overall, leadership development is an ongoing journey of learning that occurs throughout one's life, encompassing both formal and informal experiences (Alemayehu, 2021).

Leadership development in Ethiopia has received growing attention in recent years due to the need for effective leadership to foster economic growth, social change, improved governance, and the country's aspiration to realize prosperity for its citizens. This section highlights key practices in leadership development, bolstered by recent empirical evidence.

Ethiopia has expanded its higher education sector to improve leadership skills through formal education. Universities are increasingly offering programs dedicated to leadership and management. A study by Mekonnen et al. (2023) reveals that Ethiopian universities have implemented leadership development programs designed to cultivate the skills necessary for effective governance and public service. The study found that graduates of these programs felt more prepared to assume leadership roles. Data indicates that participants in specific programs demonstrated enhanced leadership competencies, including increased confidence in decision-making and strategic thinking. However, the authors also noted challenges faced by institutions, such as limited resources, a shortage of trained faculty, and inadequate practical training opportunities.

Gebremedhin and Gupta (2024) conducted a study to examine the capabilities of public university leaders in Ethiopia and the challenges they face. A mixed-methods approach was employed for this investigation. The findings indicate that leaders in the study area struggle with managing complexity and change, as well as lacking essential technical and quantitative skills. Additionally, they have difficulties in managing diversity and collaborating effectively as a team. The leaders tend to focus on familiar issues and established solutions.

The analysis revealed that essential intellectual competencies - including cognitive ability, creativity, and visionary thinking - are lacking among these leaders. This deficiency affects their capacity to propose goals and directions by creating and communicating a future vision. It is possible that they lack the necessary skills or training, or may simply be unwilling to go above and beyond their basic responsibilities. The study assessed the capacity of leaders in Ethiopian public universities based on their innovation capabilities, which include open-mindedness, creativity, strategic vision, risk-taking, and project management skills - specifically their ability to organize, monitor results, and make necessary adjustments. Consequently, the results indicated that the managerial competencies of the subjects in the study were low, potentially due to a lack of experience and insufficient funding support from relevant authorities.

The Ethiopian government has introduced several leadership training initiatives to strengthen the skills of public sector leaders. A recent evaluation by Aregawi et al. (2022) revealed that government-sponsored leadership training programs significantly enhanced participants' decision-making and strategic planning abilities. The study highlighted the necessity of ongoing training to maintain effective leadership in public administration. Besides, mentorship has become a vital aspect of leadership development, as many organizations establish coaching programs to nurture the next generation of leaders. Research conducted by Teshome and Abebe (2023) shows that mentorship programs in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Ethiopia have significantly enhanced the leadership skills of younger staff. The results indicate that mentees have experienced greater confidence and competence in their roles.

Community-driven leadership development practices prioritize local participation and engagement, which are essential for cultivating relevant leadership skills. A study by Zewdie et al. (2023) found that participatory leadership training programs significantly improved community leaders' effectiveness in tackling local issues. The research indicated that involving the community in leadership development resulted in more responsive and accountable governance.

The private sector in Ethiopia is increasingly acknowledging the significance of leadership development and is investing in training programs to improve managerial skills. A study conducted by Addis et al. (2023) examined the effects of leadership development initiatives in Ethiopian companies and found a positive correlation between these initiatives and employee performance and retention.

Leadership Development Challenges in Ethiopia: An Empirical Evidence

Ethiopia has established a lot of universities as well as management and leadership institutes to work on leadership development at federal, regional, and city levels and a significant number of resources are directed. Nevertheless, leadership development in Ethiopia, as in many developing countries, faces a variety of challenges that are influenced by socio-economic, political, and institutional factors. These challenges hinder the cultivation

of effective leaders, both in the public and private sectors, and impact the nation's progress toward sustainable development and prosperity. This section outlines key challenges facing leadership development in Ethiopia supported by recent empirical evidence, detailing findings from relevant studies.

In Africa, where Ethiopia is not an exception, one of the challenges of leadership development is that the theories and models used for leadership training are often based on curricula from Western countries. This approach tends to overlook the crucial importance of local context and culture (James, 2008). In several cases, the processes and practices of leadership development, including recruitment, selection, and assignment of leaders, are heavily influenced by political affiliation and personal relationships (Alemayehu, 2021; Demie, et al., 2021). As a result, many leaders in positions of authority lack the qualifications and capabilities needed to address contemporary challenges such as diversity, ethics, equity, equality, and competition. This situation also negatively impacts employees' readiness for leadership development. Some Higher Educational Institutions also tend to endorse leadership development policies and guidelines that are aligned with the country's ethnic-oriented politics (Mekuria, 2018). There is also the serious problem of implementing a leadership development initiative while simultaneously assuming a 'one size fits all' approach failing to consider into account personal, contextual, and cultural differences among the participants (Alemayehu, 2021). Sometimes, due to the absence of formal leadership development opportunities, there is a growing trend of self-directed learning, which is time and cost effective.

The Ethiopian educational system, despite improvements, faces significant issues such as limited access, poor infrastructure, and outdated curricula (Trines, 2018). Leadership development often begins in academic settings, but Ethiopia's education system struggles to equip future leaders with the critical thinking, innovation, and management skills necessary for leadership roles. In most cases, outdated teaching methods that focus on rote memorization rather than creative thinking are employed (Seife, 2020). This, coupled with insufficient access to higher education in rural areas and a lack of focus on leadership and soft skills development within academic curricula, hinders the country's efforts to develop forward-looking and visionary leaders capable of lifting the nation out of poverty.

There is also a lack of practical training opportunities, as many leadership programs in Ethiopia emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills, which limits the effectiveness of the training. A study by Mekonnen et al. (2023) assessed the effectiveness of leadership training programs in universities and highlighted a significant gap between theory and practice. The study reported that only 30% of participants felt their training adequately prepared them for real-world leadership challenges.

Many teachers in Ethiopia lack professional training in leadership and management, and the teaching methods employed do not foster the development of leadership traits (Abay & Marishane, 2023). For instance, classroom environments are often authoritarian, restricting students' ability to express their opinions, engage in leadership roles, or build confidence. Furthermore, leadership development opportunities are primarily found in urban areas, while rural schools suffer from severe underfunding, insufficient resources, and poorly trained teachers (Yu, et al., 2024; Tamiru & Mengistie, 2017). As a result, students from rural regions face significant disadvantages in accessing leadership training and mentorship programs. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2021, only 27% of secondary school graduates from rural areas pursued higher education, compared to 53% from urban areas (Yallew, 2020). In rural regions such as Afar and Somali, grassroots leadership development is nearly nonexistent due to a lack of formal education and leadership training. Furthermore, even in urban settings, most leadership positions are held by individuals from a few select regions, creating a leadership gap in the nation's peripheries.

Ethiopia's leadership development is often affected by the country's political context. Prolonged periods of political instability, ethnic conflicts, and governance issues hinder a stable environment for the nurturing of leadership skills (Adugna & Debale, 2023; Abagissa, 2019). Constant political tension creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, discouraging young, aspiring leaders from stepping into the political arena or taking leadership roles. Ethiopia's leadership development efforts are hampered by ongoing conflicts, particularly in regions like Tigray (Jima, 2021). Political instability makes it difficult to implement long-term leadership programs, and many young leaders are either sidelined or co-opted into ethnic politics (Asrat & Dagu, 2023). The Tigray War (2020-2022) had a devastating effect on leadership structures in the region, with universities and leadership training institutes being destroyed or shut down (Amuche & Duruji, 2023).

Another critical challenge affecting the country's leadership development efforts is the limited financial resources dedicated to the program. A study by Zewdie et al. (2022) examined the resource constraints faced by Ethiopian institutions in implementing leadership training programs. The findings revealed that inadequate funding constrained the scope and quality of training initiatives, resulting in inconsistent training experiences for participants. The study reported that 65% of respondents identified budget limitations as a major barrier to

effective training. Additionally, insufficient investment in professional development resources led to a reliance on outdated training materials and methodologies.

Ethiopia's deeply ingrained cultural and traditional systems can limit leadership development, particularly among young people and women. In many Ethiopian cultures, leadership is traditionally associated with elder men, which restricts opportunities for young individuals and women to assume leadership roles (Dagneu, et al., 2020; Labiso, 2019; Kenea, 2019; Adamu, 2022). In regions such as Amhara and Afar, younger people often have to wait until they are deemed "mature" enough to take on leadership responsibilities. A 2018 UNDP report found that in rural Ethiopia, leadership roles in local governance were overwhelmingly held by men over the age of 50. Many organizations, particularly government-run ones, resist adopting modern leadership practices. This resistance to change stifles innovation and the development of transformative leadership skills among younger generations. Research by Teshome and Abebe (2023) highlighted cultural resistance as a significant barrier to effective leadership development. The study focused on how existing power dynamics and cultural expectations limit the participation of emerging leaders in decision-making processes. The authors found that 72% of participants reported experiencing resistance from senior leaders when trying to implement new ideas, which stifled innovation and discouraged younger leaders from taking initiative. In the pastoralist communities of southern Ethiopia, leadership structures are based on traditional systems, where elders hold decision-making power. This system has hindered younger generations from stepping into leadership roles, even in areas like community development.

Insufficient support and follow-up pose a significant challenge to effective leadership development in Ethiopia. Post-training support is crucial for applying the skills learned; however, many programs lack effective follow-up mechanisms. A study by Aregawi et al. (2022) explored the impact of public sector leadership training and found substantial deficiencies in follow-up support for participants. The authors noted that 60% of participants reported a lack of ongoing mentorship or coaching after training, which hindered their ability to implement new skills effectively. The absence of a structured follow-up program limited the long-term impact of the training. Furthermore, Ethiopia lacks robust mentorship networks, which are essential for leadership development (Regassa, et al., 2019). Young professionals, particularly those from rural areas, often do not have access to mentors who can provide guidance and support. Mentorship opportunities are especially limited for women, as there are fewer women in leadership roles to serve as mentors.

While some leadership development programs are available, they often lack scope and accessibility, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, youth, and rural populations. In Ethiopia, institutions like the Ethiopian Management Institute (EMI) offer leadership and management training, but the effectiveness and reach of these programs are limited. A 2019 study by the African Leadership Academy found that only about 5% of Ethiopian youth have access to formal leadership training. Women encounter additional obstacles in leadership development due to cultural norms, limited access to education, and gender-based discrimination. For instance, in 2020, women held only 34% of managerial and leadership roles in the public sector, despite representing nearly 50% of the population. The African Leadership Academy (ALA) has sought to address the leadership gap in Ethiopia through the "Young African Leaders Initiative" (YALI); however, the program's impact is confined to a small urban elite, with only a few hundred participants from Ethiopia attending since its inception in 2010.

The infrastructure for delivering leadership training, including facilities and technology, is often inadequate, which negatively impacts the quality of programs (Dagneu, 2017; Alemayehu, 2021). A recent report by Addis et al. (2023) evaluated the state of training infrastructure in Ethiopia and its effects on leadership development. The study revealed that 55% of training facilities were poorly equipped, lacking essential resources like modern technology and teaching materials, which severely limited the effectiveness of training sessions (Getahun, 2024). Access to technology and digital tools is crucial for contemporary leadership development; however, Ethiopia's technological infrastructure remains underdeveloped, especially in rural areas. This limitation affects access to online learning, leadership training platforms, and global leadership networks. Consequently, Ethiopia's insufficient digital connectivity means that aspiring leaders may not have the same resources available to them as their global counterparts.

Ethiopia continues to be one of the poorest countries in Africa, and economic constraints significantly hinder leadership development initiatives. Effective leadership development demands substantial investment in training, mentorship, and professional development programs (Tadesse & Ravi, 2021). Unfortunately, Ethiopia's limited budget for education and human resource development often results in leadership programs being deprioritized (Tessema & Abebe, 2011). A 2021 UNESCO report revealed that less than 2% of the national education budget is dedicated to leadership and professional development. As economic opportunities are scarce, many of Ethiopia's most promising potential leaders pursue education and career opportunities abroad, leading to a considerable

"brain drain." According to a 2020 World Bank report, nearly 20% of Ethiopian professionals with leadership potential emigrate every year, many of whom do not return.

Leadership development programs frequently suffer from weak institutional frameworks and inadequate coordination among key stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and civil society. These efforts are often fragmented, with various institutions operating in isolation. For instance, while the Ministry of Education promotes leadership programs in universities, the Ministry of Public Service oversees leadership training for civil servants, resulting in a lack of coordination and a cohesive national leadership development strategy. Additionally, leadership development policies can change with political transitions, leading to inconsistent implementation. An example of this is the modification or cancellation of leadership training programs initiated under the EPRDF government following the new administration's rise in 2018, which disrupted established leadership pipelines.

Gender inequality continues to be a major obstacle to leadership development in Ethiopia, especially for women. Although there has been some progress toward gender equality, women still encounter many challenges, including cultural biases, limited access to education, and fewer professional opportunities. They are underrepresented in leadership roles across all sectors, and the gender gap in leadership development is widening. Ethiopian cultural norms frequently dissuade women from pursuing leadership positions, and there is a notable lack of targeted leadership development programs for them. Furthermore, gender discrimination remains prevalent in both the public and private sectors.

Generally, leadership development in Ethiopia encounters several challenges, including a weak education system, limited resources, cultural barriers, a fragile institutional framework, and poor coordination among stakeholders. Additionally, there is a lack of practical training opportunities, insufficient follow-up support and mentorship, and inadequate infrastructure. These hurdles diminish the effectiveness of leadership initiatives and highlight the necessity for comprehensive strategies to improve leadership development in the country. Addressing these challenges is essential for cultivating effective leadership that can drive positive change in Ethiopia.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Leadership development in Ethiopia faces a range of challenges, including political instability, cultural barriers, economic constraints, and weaknesses in the educational system and institutional frameworks. To effectively address these issues, targeted interventions in education and mentorship are necessary, alongside systemic changes in governance, gender equality, and institutional coordination. Collaboration among the government, civil society, and international partners is essential to overcoming these obstacles and nurturing the next generation of Ethiopian leaders. Besides, given the current political climate in our increasingly globalized world, it is essential to enhance leadership competencies in several key areas: diversity management, knowledge management, resource and information management, partnerships, and communication. Importantly, the attention should be directed towards those individuals who simultaneously master personal, organizational, social, and performance attributes.

The lack of a tailored approach to leadership training, combined with the prevalence of political appointments over merit-based selections, has created a leadership crisis that hinders the development of capable leaders in Ethiopia's public institutions. To address this issue, it is essential to adopt a merit-based system that prioritizes competence in the selection of individuals for leadership positions. Aligning leadership development initiatives with short and long-term organizational objectives and aspirations is also critical. More importantly, committing adequate resources is required as nothing can be done without resources.

Overall, this multifaceted challenge calls for a multifaceted approach that includes but is not limited to, educational reform, improved access to leadership training and mentorship, gender equality initiatives, and stronger institutional frameworks. Moreover, Ethiopia's leadership development efforts should be culturally contextualized and aligned with the nation's socio-political realities to achieve meaningful results.

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