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*Full Length Research Paper*

# Leadership Styles Employed by Presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America

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**Presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America face several challenges as a result of leadership styles and decision-making. This has greatly hampered the quality of graduates coming out of these colleges due to poor facilitation and service delivery. This study investigates the leadership styles employed by presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and presents some important insights for future academic discourse. A qualitative research design was adopted. Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness and integrity of the research process and materials. A total of 17 presidents were involved in the study through interviews. Data were analyzed using content analysis method. Several leadership theories were used to ground the study on theory. Findings indicated that each participant manifested a combination of the characteristics represented by these theories with different aspects of leadership emerging in response to specific challenges and contexts. Further, some responses indicate that college presidents applied more than one theory in their leadership activities depending on the situation.**

**Keywords:** Leadership styles, leadership theories, college presidents, Historically Black Colleges and Universities

## INTRODUCTION

The United States of America (U.S.A) is widely accepted as one of the worldwide leaders in providing quality

higher education services. According to Freeman (2006), only a few countries can compare to the U. S' higher education system in terms of learning, scientific and technological achievements, or in contributions to society. However, in today's dire economic and political times,

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higher education is faced with meeting the changing demands of society, and while the quality of U.S. higher education has never been greater, public interest in higher education has never been more intense (Freeman, 2006). Under these circumstances, U.S. colleges and universities, as major complex organizations, have simultaneously struggled to adapt to a number of environmental (internal and external) demands which have threatened their survival in many instances. In a complex environment of rapid change and globalization (Simon, 2009), university and college presidential leadership has become a more important factor in advancing the institution (Kezar and Ekeze, 2008). As a result, college leaders will likely be expected to directly aid the higher education organization in meeting the uncertainty of these complex demands by implementing decision-making practices that are more strategically focused and resolutely oriented.

Presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States of America face pretty much the same or even worse challenges that American universities face. There are issues concerning inappropriate leadership styles and decision-making practices that have greatly hampered the quality of graduates coming out of these colleges (Hall and Alfred, 2014; Maxwell, 2008).

In addition to leadership considerations, the role of public HBCUs has also become a source of confusion. Minor (2008) contends that the role of public HBCUs is a source of ambiguity in the higher education community for two key reasons. First, there is the lack of contextual understanding among the public and even some higher education professionals about the purpose of HBCUs. Secondly, HBCUs are now publicly conflicted with what they were historically and what they might become more contemporarily. These issues are further complicated with under-funding by state governments and tepid support from private donors, accreditations issues, and the inability of the HBCU to maintain adequate leadership (Ezzell and Schexnider, 2010). These challenges call for proper leadership for the HBCUs to continue offering quality education in a sustainable. This study investigates the leadership styles employed by HBCUs presidents and presents some important insights for future academic discourse.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND STYLES**

Various leadership theories were examined in the literature in order to ground and understand leadership styles that HBCU presidents are applying and the salient

characteristics embedded in that may influence successful leadership of HBCUs in the United States of America as follows:

### **Contemporary Leadership Theories**

Fundamentally, theories on leadership developed in the higher education arena are rooted in the industrial paradigm. However, Bensimon et al. (1989) explain that researchers have attempted to integrate findings in higher education literature with more general theories of leadership. Research in higher education leadership primarily focuses on many different approaches or theories and how each can be used to influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Weaver, 2005). Most research has focused on the actions of leadership such as managing, motivating, compromising, planning, organizing, and other behaviors that have a high probability of resulting in desirable organizational outcomes. Nevertheless, Mangum (1993) emphasizes that college and university presidents differ in their strategies, tactics, personalities, codes of personal conduct, and in the results they leave behind them. In examination of works on leadership, Bensimon et al. (1989) grouped the literature into five primary categories which includes: (a) Trait Theory; (b) Power and Influence Theories (both transactional/social exchange and transformational/social power; (c) Behavioral Theory, including managerial roles; (d) Contingency Theory and (e) Symbolic and Cultural Theories. It is hypothesized that these theoretical frameworks provide salient insight into a leader's focus, what actions they use to carry out that focus, and how these leaders interpret the roles that affect their daily decision-making practices (Birnbbaum, 1988; Lee, 1994).

### **Trait Theory**

This framework focuses on the innate qualities of the leader; wherein, personal mastery is the key to leadership (Lee, 1994). Many of the earliest inquiries into the nature of leadership centered around the notion that some individuals seem to be born with characteristics and traits which enable them to lead better than others (Slater et al., 1994; Yukl, 1994).

In the earlier part of the 20th century, this theory was known as the "Great Man Theory of Leadership" and is supported today by individuals who consider the leadership of "great men" (Iacocca, MacArthur, Kennedy, King) to have been transformational (Bass, 1990). Trait Theory tends to explain leadership in terms of physical

characteristics, personality, social background, ability and character (Bensimon et al., 1989; Yukl, 1994). This approach further suggests that some people are more predisposed to attain and excel in leadership positions. Gerth and Mills (1953) expanded Stogdill's work and went even further to include (1) the motives of the leader; (2) the images that the selected publics hold of leaders; (3) the type of institution and atmosphere in which he or she leads; and (4) the position itself in the study of leadership.

### **Power and Influence Theory**

This framework attempts to explain the interaction of the leader and follower relationship through the amount of power attained by the leader and how that power is exercised over followers. Two major themes have been identified: (a) one-way social power and (b) two-way social exchange. The social power approach considers how leaders influence followers, and the social exchange approach discusses the give-and-take relationship between leaders and followers through which leaders are influenced as they try to influence others (Bensimon et al., 1989). From this perspective, social power is the ability to take charge and to initiate change. It is a relationship in which the more powerful person is able to obtain compliance with his or her ideas (Bass, 1990). Both power and influence theories have been extensively applied in understanding the effectiveness of leaders in academic organizations.

Power is generally regarded as the ability to influence a mental and physical change in behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, and values. Understanding power involves distinguishing between various types of power. French and Raven (1959) identified five types of power. The types of power in reference to the source of influence include: 1) Reward power (positional influence), where follower's willingness to do a task is based on the number and type of rewards the follower believes the leader can provide; 2) Coercive power (positional influence) where a follower does a task to avoid punishment by the leader; 3) Legitimate power (positional influence) where a follower completes a task because the follower believes that the leader has a right to make the request due to his/her position; 4) Referent power (personal influence) where a follower's willingness to complete a task is based on what the leader represents or stands for; and 5) Expert power (personal influence) where a follower completes a task because of the follower's belief that the leader has the expertise and knowledge in the area of concern to complete the task successfully (French and Raven, 1959).

### **Behavioral Theory**

The third framework describes the day-to-day behavior of the leader, which in turn influences those around them (Bass and Stodgill, 1990). Expressing goals and motivating others to action are the main criteria of the Behavior Theory (Birnbaum, 1989). Expressing goals and motivation to action are seen through behaviors referring to the institutional goals and behavior concerned with moving people to actions in support of these goals. Managing and providing psychological support and inspiration are exhibited in behaviors that provide administrative support to achieve goals, and behavioral that provides the psychological support, which encourages, challenges, and gives a sense of achievement to the followers (Lee, 1994).

### **Contingency Theories**

In a broad sense, Contingency Theories are a class of behavioral theory which contends that there is no one best way of organizing and leading, and that an organizational/leadership style that is effective in some situations may not be successful in others. The four important ideas of this theory include (a) there is no universal or one best way to manage; (b) the design of an organization and its subsystems must fit with the environment; (c) effective organizations not only have a proper fit with the environment but also between its subsystems; (d) the needs of an organization are better satisfied when it is properly designed and the management style is appropriate both to the tasks undertaken and the nature of the work group (Fiedler, 1964).

Additionally, it should be observed that this approach to leadership focuses on the importance of situational factors that require different behaviors in order for leaders to be effective. Since what is considered effective behavior is contingent on the situation, contingency theories emphasize the importance of factors outside the organization rather than internal variables (Bensimon et al., 1989). Although the physical characteristics and personality traits of the leader are elements taken into consideration here, the chief factors include the nature of the external environment, the type of task, expectations of the followers, energy and activity levels, interpersonal competencies, presence or absence of a crisis, or any one of several other factors (Bensimon et al.; Hoy and Miskel, 1996). According to Birnbaum (1988), the essence of the Contingency Theory is that different forms of organization and administrative leadership prove to be the most effective under different conditions.

Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership (Fiedler, 1967) quantified the study of the leader in conjunction with the situation in which the leader is leading. This model proposes that most leaders are either task oriented or relations oriented and suggests it is important to understand the leader's personality and degree of situational control. He developed the Contingency Theory of Leadership by studying different leadership styles mostly in military contexts (Fiedler, 1971). In theory, it tries to match leaders and their leadership styles to appropriate situations. It is contingent because it suggests that a leader's effectiveness depends on how well the leader's style fits into a particular context.

### **Symbolic and Cultural Theories**

This framework represents another shift in thinking about organizations and leadership from models that assume organizations can be described, analyzed, and improved to ones that assume organizations are created, invented and interpreted (Bensimon et al., 1989). The cultural or symbolic leader encourages followers to develop shared meanings that define the organization's culture. Leadership of this type is known as "the management theory" (Bensimon et al 1989). The study of leadership in this area is focused in three ways: (a) on heroic leaders, (b) on leaders at the highest echelons, and (c) on individuals rather than teams (Bryman, 1996). These leaders give "symbolic meaning to events that others may see as perplexing, senseless, or chaotic" (Bensimon et al., 1989, p. 46). Cultural and symbolic leadership is necessary in order to sustain and strengthen the culture that already exists as well as to implement changes (Dill, 1982; Yukl, 1994).

### **RESEARCH DESIGN, PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS**

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study and several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness and integrity of the research process and materials. Creswell (2005) states that the research needs to protect their research participants develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of research, guard against misconduct and impropriety that may reflect on their organization or institution, and cope with new and challenges problems. To address ethical concerns related to this research, approval of Jackson State University's Internal Review Board was obtained prior to initiating the study. In addition, each participant was provided with an informed consent form, which identified the researcher and the sponsoring institution, indicated

the purpose of the research and the benefits for participating, identified the level and type of participant involvement, noted any risk to the participant, guaranteed confidentiality, assured the participant that he/she could withdraw at anytime and also provided names of persons to contact if questions arose.

Further, to maintain respondents privacy and confidentiality, the names used in the presentation of findings hereafter, are not real names of respondents but rather nicknames assigned by the researchers.

The data were collected through interviews conducted via telephone calls. This was necessitated by the high costs of travel, given that this study covered the whole of the United States of America. Interviews were recorded and the interviews were informed of that prior to the interview.

### **Data Transcription**

Transcribing data refers to the process of listening to audio recordings of interviews and writing down what is heard verbatim (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Though transcription can be exhaustive, the researcher of this study transcribed each of the 17 interviews verbatim according to the guidelines. After transcription, the audio recording was compared with the written version to ensure accuracy.

### **Coding**

After transcribing the data, the researchers worked closely and intensively with the written text, analyzing it for insights into the HBCU presidents' experience and perspective as leaders and their decision-making practices regarding critical issues at their institutions. As the analysis developed, emerging codes were catalogued as they related to the interview questions, and the subsequent patterns which developed into themes. These themes represented recurring patterns of meanings, ideas, thoughts, and feelings for leadership styles and decision-making practices for internal and external institutional issues. The themes were likely to identify both something that matters to the participants (i.e. an object of concern, topic of some import) and to convey something of the meaning of that particular thing for the participants.

### **FINDINGS**

This section presents findings from primary data.

Table 1 Respondents' attributes

Age group			Status		Total
			Current President	Former President	
41-45 years	Gender	Male	2		2
	<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>
56-60 years	Gender	Female	2	1	3
		Male	1	0	1
	<b>Total</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
61-65 years	Gender	Male	6	1	7
	<b>Total</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>
66-70 years	Gender	Female	1		1
	<b>Total</b>		<b>1</b>		<b>1</b>
71 and above years	Gender	Male	3		3
	<b>Total</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>
Total	Gender	Female	3	1	4
		Male	12	1	13
	<b>Total</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>

### Summary of background attributes

Data were collected and analyzed on respondents attributes in order to understand the nature and type of respondents. This data revolved around age, gender and their current employment status in the university as presidents. Table 1 shows the results.

According to results in Table 1, the first age group, 41-45 years had 2 male respondents currently serving as presidents. The second age group, 56-60 years had 3 female respondents; 2 currently serving college presidents and 1 former college president. Age group 56-60 years also had 1 male respondent serving as a college president. Further, age group 61-65 years had 7 respondents, all of them male. Out of the 7, 6 were currently serving presidents while 1 was a former president. Age group 66-70 years had only 1 respondent serving as a college presidents, while age group 71 and above years had 3 male respondents, all of them in active service. Thus the total number of respondents was 17, out whom, 15 were current presidents and 2 were former presidents.

### Contemporary Leadership Theories

The review of literature contained an overview of five leadership theories and their relationship to decision-making: Trait Theory, Power and Influence Theory, Behavioral Theory, Contingency Theory, and the Symbolic and Cultural Theories. As could be expected, however, the data from this study indicated that each participant manifested a combination of the characteristics represented by these theories with

different aspects of leadership emerging in response to specific challenges and contexts. Also, some responses could be taken as indicative of more than one theory, depending on the context in which they were situated.

For example, Trait Theory focuses on the innate qualities of the leader and attempts to explain leadership in terms of physical characteristics, personality, social background, ability and character (Bensimon et al., 1989; Yuki, 1994). The data indicated several instances in which participants described processes and practices in conformance with this notion. Charles, for example, provided additional support for this theory in his detailed discussion of the history of HBCUs. He noted that in the past the majority of HBCUs were located in small, rural communities. The president, he noted, was often the only person on campus with a terminal degree, a fact that added to his or her stature, both on campus and in the community. These presidents enjoyed inclusion in the top tier of their communities and often formed strong links with the faith-based community in support of institutional goals. However, this focus placed additional pressure on the presidential decision-making process in that these leaders were expected to make important decisions based on their own ideas and priorities, yet were held accountable by the community for the successful outcome of these decisions.

Alicia demonstrated this model of leadership and her ability to lead when she was able to achieve a fast turnaround of a dire financial situation – six years of operating deficits – within the first few months of work in her present position. “I was able to do that after the first quarter and some of the decisions I made, even though some of them were not popular, began to stabilize things.” The last portion of Alicia’s statement, however,

also could be interpreted as an example of the Power and Influence Theory, since it indicates the possible use of coercive positional influence.

An example drawn from the data that demonstrated the participant's character was Richard's statement that "You got to be very clear on what your principles are, what are the things that you most believe in, and then you're constant despite whatever ways times change." Thoughtful analysis of this statement leads to the conclusion that Symbolic and Cultural Theories may be operative here, since this type of leader encourages followers to develop shared meanings that define the organization's culture. It also could be viewed as an example of referent or expert power.

Other instances of leaders' conformance with the Power and Influence Theory are found in the interview data of several participants. French and Raven (1959) discussed five kinds of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. These researchers further categorized these types of power as either positional or personal. The types most clearly seen in the data, however, seem to be a subtle combination of more than one, and sometimes several of these at a time. Michael, for example, seemed to demonstrate coercive power when he stated "I like to drive processes and drive them hard. I have a clear sense of what it is that I want to get done, and once I make my mind up about what I'm going to do, I pursue it aggressively." While this obviously could be viewed as an exertion of coercive power, it might also reveal aspects of his inherent ability, personality, and what Lee (1994) termed personal mastery. Michael also described his style as "participatory to a certain extent, but added that "at some point I know that someone has to cut off debate and make decisions."

Isaac exemplified the use of both legitimate and expert power during his campaign to increase admissions standards at his college. Despite strong opposition, he was able to convince stakeholders and gain support for his plan by referring to admission standards outlined in the institution's 1930 catalog. "I showed them that this was not just my idea, but would in fact mark a return to the organization's historical mission." This statement also may be taken as an exercise of referent power, since it indicated what he represented or stood for, as well as the Symbolic and Cultural Theories.

The social exchange aspect of Power and Influence Theory was widely evident in the data. This notion describes a leader's ability to take charge and initiate change, and has especially been applied to understanding their effectiveness in academic settings. This could be applied to Isaac's statement above and also by the many participants who described their

leadership style as collaborative, since in each instance these presidents noted not only the importance of gaining input by creating a setting in which all stakeholders could be heard, but also the necessity of being in charge of the overall decision-making and results. Charles said "My leadership style is no excuses." Although his practices included accommodating input from faculty, students, and others, he added that "then you must make a decision. It has to be yours, one you can live with." This topic will be expanded below when interviewees' comments regarding specific institutional challenges are examined in depth.

Almost all the interviews revealed statements that could be construed as evidence of Behavioral Theory. Although Birnbaum (1989) said that expressing goals and motivating others to action are the main criteria of Behavioral Theory, another important aspect is that the leader leads by example. Paul, for example, described the salary negotiation process prior to his appointment as president. He startled the interview committee by asking for a salary of \$28,000 less than what was offered. "When people see that the leader is willing to make sacrifices they are willing to go without raises also." He added that this allowed him to give faculty and other employees bonuses of \$500 each at Christmas, which might be viewed as an example of the exercise of reward power.

Blake also gave evidence of leading by example when he stated "I have to demonstrate the leadership style from my knowledge base, my actions, to demonstrate what it's like to be a senior leader of a 21st century institution." George believed in setting high expectations and providing support for individuals to achieve their goals and objectives. "You have to tie everything back to the mission, the goals of the university, and then provide reinforcement as necessary and leadership by example." Isaac searched for a term to describe his leadership but said "I'm very active. I lead by example. It's like a player/coach; it's really that kind of model where you know there isn't any task that is too little for me to do."

Evidence of the Contingency Theory also was well documented in the data. Fielder (1967) quantified the study of the leader by proposing a model that states that leaders are either task-oriented or relations-oriented, and further suggests that an understanding of the leader's personality and degree of situational control is essential. Francine explained that "My mind thinks like a conductor, where if there's an issue over here, I focus here, and if someone needs encouragement in some other area, I'm over there." This theory focuses on the importance of situational factors that require different behaviors in order for leaders to be effective. In her collaborative leadership style, Alicia has found it necessary to adjust her position at times based on the insights gleaned from others.

Francine, however, noted a difficulty that sometimes surfaced during the process of getting ideas and buy-ins from stakeholders. "That doesn't always happen. It's a struggle to get it not to look like it's coming from the top down." James reported the necessity of flexibility in his statement "You make triage decisions relative to keeping your mission on track," and Isaac summarized Contingency Theory succinctly: "You do what you have to do to get the job done."

Symbolic and Cultural Theories have been referenced earlier in this discussion but now will be addressed here more fully. Bensimon et al. (1989) moved the focus from models that assume organizations can be described, analyzed, and improved to ones that assume they are created, invented, and interpreted. This theory maintains that leaders at the highest echelons give symbolic meaning to events that others may find confusing or senseless. Francine described her leadership style as "future oriented. It's hopefully visionary." This discussion ties in with Charles' observations about the traditional role of the HBCU president as one where the individual held a high status both on- and off-campus, and served as a symbol of the achievement available to African Americans through higher education.

Olivia framed a difficult situation with human resources in terms of culture. She explained that several individuals on her team actually have more than one job. She gave as example an assistant dean who also serves as a department chair, and a vice president in charge of administration who is responsible for financial aid, auxiliary services, plant management, and the financial life of the university. "In terms of human resources HBCUs are highly challenged," she said. When asked if she attributes this problem to finances, she replied, "No, I attribute it to culture, cultural differences where people just think that is how it's always been done."

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Responses to the topic of leadership revealed the interrelatedness of this concept with other elements for the successful operation of the institution. Comparison of the data with the five categories of contemporary leadership theories (Bensimon et al., 1989) revealed more similarities than differences among presidential approaches to leadership. None of the participants seemed to fit solely within any of the theoretical frameworks. The Trait Theory rubric, for example, was inadequate to fully account for presidential leadership style, although most participants made comments that indicated the presence of ability, character, and personality described by this theory. The relationship

between these traits and institutional type (Gerth and Mills, 1953) was of special interest here, however, since this study was limited to the p Some traits of the Symbolic and Cultural Theories surfaced in the data as well, especially as related to the creation of shared meaning, and to gain buy-in. Other findings did not corroborate with those outlined by Bensimon et al. (1989); in their discussion of this management theory, the authors focused on the high-level, heroic individual rather than the team. While the admiration of the learning community for particular presidents could be inferred from the comments of certain interviewees, there was no indication in the data that personal popularity or stature was used for any purpose other than team building and moving the institution forward

Another mismatch between the literature and the interview data surfaced in regard to the concept of presidential effectiveness. Although a study of leadership by Fisher et al. (1988) found that effective college presidents were less collegial and more distant, the data from this study indicate the opposite. The authors described a hierarchical approach that they expressed in the Fisher/Tack Model, which characterized solitary decision-making and lack of attention to communication as desirable traits, and labeled representative presidents as weak. Data from this study were more in alignment with the findings of Bing and Dye (1992) who believed that hierarchical leadership was counterproductive in that it had adverse effects on the academic life of the institution. In each of the 17 interviews conducted for this study, collegiality and accessibility were evident.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As predicted by the Symbolic and Cultural Theory of leadership presented by Bensimon et al. (1989) and Bryman (1996), three participants felt that their most important contribution was in changing the culture of the institution to one that was efficient, inclusive and confident. Desired change was often consciously set forth in detailed strategic plans. Ellen, for example, included in her strategic plan quantum leaps in the standardization and improvement of technology to better position her university in the 21st century global market. "We have moved more toward distance ed and now have a distance ed master's program, the only one in the state, in educational leadership," she said.

As a result of analysis of the data obtained from this study, it has become clear that a combination of knowledge, experience, and perspective in conjunction with individual traits informs the leadership styles and decision-making practices of participating HBCU

presidents. Leadership styles have changed in significant ways during the past several decades. Cultural shifts have occurred whereby old models of leadership have been replaced by approaches that value the input and perspectives of others, while still retaining the right to exercise overruling decisiveness on key points.

As discussed above, the original style of HBCU leadership was based on individual decision-making that typically did not involve other members of the learning community. This, however, has evolved into a community-oriented process whereby presidents invite and value the input of faculty, students, parents, religious leaders, businesses, and other stakeholders, while still retaining the authority to make final decisions.

This contemporary model of leadership is grounded in the changes that have emerged within these institutions as high percentages of faculty now possess doctoral degrees and all others have at least a master's degree in their field; this, in effect, makes the president first among peers. Other factors that support this notion of shared governance include the increased educational attainment of community members, advances in technology that enable the instantaneous transmission of data and images, and state or local mandates that require this form of governance.

## LIMITATIONS

Inherent in the design of this study was the limitation of non-generalizability of findings. Although the consistence of many data suggests that other HBCU presidents may share some of the same decision-making practices as part of their leadership styles, it is likely that different practices may be favored by others. In addition, it is possible that the findings could be subject to interpretations other than those deduced by the researcher. Additionally, the fact that all of the interviews were conducted via telephone versus face to face was also a limitation to this study.

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