

Exploring Collaborative Leadership Experiences of Leaders in Selected Insurance Companies in Kenya

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore collaborative leadership from the experiences of leaders in selected insurance companies in Kenya as contemporary workplaces and suggested enhancements to improve its effectiveness. The contention of the study is that collaborative leadership (CL) is increasingly recognised as an essential approach for effectively managing the complexities of dynamic environments and leveraging emerging opportunities in organisations. However, the lack of consensus in its theoretical underpinnings and conceptualisation poses significant challenges to its practical implementation. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study delved into the perspectives and experiences of 11 purposively selected leaders from 42 insurance companies in Kenya through in-depth interviews. Insights were gained into how these leaders perceive and apply CL within their respective organisational contexts. Thematic analysis of the data illuminated prevailing deficiencies in CL practices across the sampled workplaces. The findings elucidate that collaborative leadership is predominantly understood and practised through the lenses of collaboration, fostering relationships, and breaking silos. The study proposed measures such as cultivating authenticity, modelling appropriate behaviours, and strengthening top echelons' support as possible measures to bridge the deficiencies in collaborative leadership practice in insurance companies in Kenya. The proposed enhancements aim to align collaborative leadership theory with practice and deepen scholarly understanding and practical implementation within contemporary workplaces. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing development and application of collaborative leadership principles within contemporary organisational contexts, thereby fostering more effective and adaptive leadership practices in dynamic environments by bridging the gap between theory and practice. Acknowledging the limitations, the study suggests avenues for theoretical advancements and future research.

Keywords: Kenya, collaborative leadership, authenticity, top echelons, thematic analysis, contemporary workplace

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Introduction

In the contemporary workplace, the application of collaborative leadership has garnered considerable attention as a means of navigating the complexities arising from diverse stakeholder interactions, resource limitations, and intricate global interdependencies (Chi Vu & Gill, 2019; Crespi-Vallbona et al., 2022). As workplaces evolve, so do leadership paradigms, with collaborative leadership emerging as a pivotal approach to bridging fragmented connections within these dynamic environments. Indeed, effective collaborative leadership practices are recognised for nurturing inclusive cultures, leveraging diverse perspectives, and fostering innovation and adaptability (Lawrence, 2017; Salman & Auso, 2022). However, despite growing acknowledgement of its significance, the practical implementation of collaborative leadership remains challenging in contemporary organizations (Ang'ana et al., 2023a; Maalouf, 2019).

A key obstacle to the effective application of collaborative leadership lies in the scarcity of empirical research on its conceptualisation within contemporary organizational contexts. Furthermore, there is a dearth of scholarship examining the impact of collaborative leadership on contemporary workplace outcomes and a deficiency in the capacity to monitor and evaluate its application adequately (Endre et al., 2020; Maalouf, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Extant existing studies have primarily explored the relationship between collaborative leadership and firm outcomes such as employee relations, effectiveness, and performance, yet often lack practical rigour (Endre et al., 2020; Hsieh & Liou, 2018; Lawrence, 2017; Maalouf, 2019; Markle-Reid et al., 2017; Nkengbeza et al., 2016; Nyang'au et al., 2018). Moreover, these studies tend to focus on theoretical frameworks or anecdotal evidence, neglecting the challenges of implementing collaborative leadership in practice within contemporary workplaces (Endre et al., 2020; Lawrence, 2017; Maalouf, 2019; Nyang'au et al., 2018). Therefore, an exploration of collaborative leadership experiences from leaders in a contemporary setting could help address these gaps and propose possible solutions to challenges affecting the contemporary workplace.

Statement of the Problem

Insurance companies in Kenya today grapple with challenges such as unstable financial performance, stagnant insurance penetration, and slow technology adoption, hindering their growth and competitiveness over the last decades (Langat et al., 2019; Morara & Sibindi, 2021). Effective leadership in this sector can inspire innovation, cultivate inclusivity, and drive strategic technology adoption, thus addressing these challenges and ensuring sustainable performance (Azegele et al., 2021). Collaborative leadership emerges as a compelling solution to the concerns facing insurance companies in Kenya. Through collaborative efforts, leaders can create a supportive environment that encourages innovation and agility, ultimately driving holistic and sustainable performance.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring how collaborative leadership is practised in selected insurance companies in Kenya and proposing measures for improvement to enhance sustainable performance. Effective collaborative leadership could be pivotal to insurance companies in Kenya in fostering inclusive cultures, leveraging diverse perspectives, and adapting to evolving challenges while enhancing performance and sustainability. Therefore, this study aimed to bridge the conceptual, theoretical, and practical applications of collaborative leadership within insurance companies in Kenya as contemporary workplaces.

With a focus on deepening our comprehension of collaborative leadership and enhancing its practice, this research sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do leaders in selected insurance companies in Kenya experience collaborative leadership?
2. What measures can be taken to enhance collaborative leadership practice in selected insurance companies in Kenya?

The article is organized as follows to provide a comprehensive examination of these questions: The introduction offers an overview of the study's background and introduces the problem statement. Subsequent sections delve into insights from the literature and outline the study's methodology. Section four presents the findings and discussions derived from the study. Finally, the conclusion section summarises the study's key findings and implications.

Literature Review

The Case for Effective Leadership in the Contemporary Workplace

The contemporary workplace embodies a dynamic landscape shaped by an array of socio-economic, technological, and cultural forces, necessitating a thorough examination of emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities (Loyless, 2023; Tercero, 2020). Significant transformations in the nature of work, propelled by globalisation, digitalisation, and demographic shifts, have redefined traditional employment paradigms, with the proliferation of remote work, gig economy platforms, and flexible arrangements altering conventional notions (Hategan & Hategan, 2020; Kalleberg, 2018). Concurrently, the ascendancy of knowledge-intensive industries and the integration of artificial intelligence technologies have reconfigured skill requirements and job roles, marking a pivotal shift in workforce dynamics (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Salman & Auso, 2022).

Moreover, the contemporary workplace champions diversity and inclusion initiatives to foster equitable opportunities and harness varied perspectives, with research affirming the superiority of diverse teams in driving creativity, innovation, and problem-solving (Hategan & Hategan, 2020; Loyless, 2023). However, effectively managing diversity demands organizational dedication, cultural proficiency, and inclusive leadership practices, which underscores the significance of inclusive workplace cultures (Hategan & Hategan, 2020). Concurrently, technological advancements have revolutionised work processes, communication, and collaboration, with digital tools such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality facilitating remote work, amplifying productivity, and fostering global connectivity, albeit accompanied by challenges such as cybersecurity risks and digital disparities (Lakomski & Evers, 2022; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019).

Furthermore, the contemporary workplace prioritises preserving work-life balance and enhancing employee well-being, propelled by concerns regarding prolonged work hours, job insecurity, and mounting performance pressures (Stynen & Semeijn, 2023). In response, workplaces increasingly adopt wellness initiatives, flexible work arrangements, and

Citation: Ang'ana, G. A; Dr. Ongeti, W. J & Chiroma, J. A. (2024). Exploring Collaborative Leadership Experiences of Leaders in Selected Insurance Companies in Kenya. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 8(7), 220 – 239.

mindfulness programs to bolster employee health and productivity, a trend further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic's embrace of remote work and virtual collaboration, albeit accompanied by challenges of social isolation and blurred work-life boundaries, underscoring the indispensable role of effective leadership in fostering collaboration and engagement in remote work environments (Loyless, 2023; Stynen & Semeijn, 2023). In this evolving landscape, collaborative leadership emerges as a holistic approach essential for navigating complexities and capitalising on emerging opportunities, aligning with the dynamic imperatives of the contemporary workplace.

Insurance companies in Kenya today, as contemporary workplaces, have undergone significant shifts driven by socio-economic, technological, and cultural forces. Remote work, flexible arrangements, and AI integration redefine traditional employment, while diversity and inclusion initiatives emphasize equitable opportunities (Azegele et al., 2021; Langat et al., 2019; Morara & Sibindi, 2021). Moreover, technological advancements have revolutionized work processes, communication, and collaboration, albeit accompanied by challenges such as cybersecurity risks and digital disparities in insurance companies. Wellness initiatives address concerns of prolonged work hours and job insecurity (Langat et al., 2019). All these concerns have had an influence on the sustainable performance of insurance companies in Kenya. Effective leadership becomes crucial in fostering collaboration and engagement, underlining the importance of collaborative leadership in navigating complexities and seizing opportunities to enhance sustainable performance (Apergis & Poufinas, 2020; Benami et al., 2020; Langat et al., 2019; Morara & Sibindi, 2021).

Collaborative Leadership Influence in the Workplace

Leadership theories have evolved in response to shifting societal values and demands, with each new theory introducing changes in emphasis and factors influencing leadership outcomes (Lakomski & Evers, 2022; Northouse, 2019). In the contemporary workplace landscape, characterised by diversity and inclusion challenges and the phenomenon of "quiet quitting," effective collective action by leaders becomes imperative (Nowell et al., 2016; Stynen & Semeijn, 2023). This prompts the question: How can successful collaborative leadership action be achieved in today's workplace context? The contemporary environment demands novel leadership behaviours characterized by authenticity, credibility, and competence, forming the foundation of collaborative leadership, which prioritizes collective intelligence and shared decision-making (Ang'ana et al., 2023b).

Collaborative leadership integrates diverse theoretical frameworks from organizational psychology, management, and sociology, underscoring the importance of cultivating genuine relationships among team members and fostering trust, mutual respect, and open communication (Okpala, 2020; Shu & Wang, 2021). Leaders in collaborative settings relinquish direct control over the group, guiding and coordinating decision-making processes toward shared goals (Jacklin-Jarvis & Potter, 2019; Shu & Wang, 2020). This approach is particularly valuable in addressing complex issues that exceed the capacity of any single individual or entity to resolve, emphasizing the dynamic interactions between leaders, followers, and organizational systems (Müller & Van Esch, 2020).

Despite its potential benefits, collaborative leadership presents challenges such as role ambiguity, decision-making complexities, and power imbalances that require proactive interventions and an understanding of current gaps in its application (Endre et al., 2020; Maalouf, 2019). Emerging trends like virtual collaboration and cross-cultural dynamics

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further complicate contemporary workplace leadership, necessitating evidence-based practices to enhance workplace outcomes and sustainability (Cherry et al., 2018; Lundqvist et al., 2023). This study addresses these gaps by proposing solutions grounded in collaborative leadership principles, aiming to foster inclusive cultures, leverage diverse perspectives, and drive innovation and adaptability in the contemporary workplace.

Methodology

Qualitative research of a phenomenological nature was selected as the preferred method for data collection, analysis, and conclusion drawing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Terrell, 2016). This approach was deemed most appropriate for mitigating researcher bias and facilitating a comprehensive exploration of collaborative leadership phenomena from leaders' perspectives within contemporary workplaces (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By delving into individuals' experiences, this method enabled a deeper comprehension of the attributes of collaborative leadership, thereby informing the development of effective practices.

Data Collection

To ensure a thorough exploration of participants' perspectives, in-depth, unstructured interviews served as the principal method for data collection, conducted both online via Zoom and face-to-face sessions. As advocated by Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) and Patton (2015), this approach facilitates access to respondents' experiences, knowledge, thoughts, and feelings. Participants, selected based on their comprehensive understanding of collaborative leadership in the workplace, were chosen purposively from forty-two insurance companies in Kenya, totalling eleven individuals.

The participants, who were CEOs of insurance companies in Kenya, had extensive experience in organizational leadership and were actively involved in implementing policies and practices within their organizations. Their strategic expertise and industry leadership positions made them valuable sources for insights into collaborative leadership practices within their respective organizations. Following Bryman's (2016) and Kruger and Stones' (1981) strategy, individuals with requisite experiences were sought to delve into the phenomena. Verbatim transcriptions of the recorded interviews constituted the primary data source (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

This research employed qualitative thematic analysis, following the approach articulated by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2023), chosen for its nuanced exploration of meanings and patterns within the text rather than mere word counting. Reviewing interview transcripts focused on extracting meaningful themes to contextualize collaborative leadership, its application, and associated challenges, aligning with Bryman's (2016) and Terrell's (2016) emphasis on grasping the structure of sense in human science studies. Through this analysis, a synopsis of core themes of collaborative leadership emerged from the interview transcripts, integrating both common and unique themes while attending to nuanced distinctions to avoid amalgamation. This methodological rigour facilitated a comprehensive understanding of collaborative leadership's multifaceted dimensions and its application in contemporary organizational contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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Ethical considerations and validity

Ensuring credibility, honesty, and ethical considerations in qualitative research, a thorough literature review on collaborative leadership and contemporary workplace dynamics provided the necessary theoretical and philosophical grounding, enhancing the study's validity and reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This informed the selection of a qualitative approach, fostering an empathetic understanding of respondents' perspectives while mitigating biases, thus enhancing the study's trustworthiness. Adhering to established research protocols, formal informed consent was obtained from respondents, ensuring clarity regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, ethical clearance was secured from The National Commission for Science and Innovations (NACOSTI) and PAC University, further safeguarding the study's ethical integrity.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the themes that surfaced from the thematic analysis of the data outlined in the methodology. Herein, the findings depict the leaders' comprehension of collaborative leadership as gleaned from the data and insights into its implementation within their respective workplaces. To uphold participants' rights to anonymity, the respondents were identified with the following tags: LD1, LD2, LD3, LD4, LD5, LD6, LD7, LD8, LD9, LD10, and LD11. Subsequently, direct excerpts from the interview data were referenced alongside the corresponding themes. Guided by the research questions, the findings are organised and discussed based on the current understanding and practice of collaborative leadership and perspectives on enhancing collaborative leadership effectiveness.

Collaborative Leadership Experiences in the Workplace

Participants were tasked with sharing their experiences on collaborative leadership within their organization. Six themes emerged, detailing the nuances of understanding and applying collaborative leadership. Figure 1 graphically represents these themes for clarity. It is important to note that these themes are not hierarchical or sequential but are interconnected and overlapping in practical applications of collaborative leadership principles.

Figure 1

Understanding and Practice of Collaborative Leadership



Source: Field Data (2023)

The research findings suggest that collaborative leadership is primarily centred on the concept of 'collaboration'. Insights from most respondents underscored the acknowledgement of collaboration within organizations. This collaborative ethos is often evidenced through shared departments like human resources (H.R.), product development, and information communication technology (ICT), which function as vital support systems across different workplace departments. All respondents confirmed having encountered collaboration within their organizations, viewing it as synonymous with practising collaborative leadership. Respondent LD2 described collaborative leadership as the primary challenge for their organization, citing difficulties with collaboration. LD7 shared that there needs to be specific actions and behaviours from all employees for collaboration to thrive. LD5 believed that embracing 'collaboration' would enhance profitability. These excerpts reveal a prevailing perception among leaders that collaborative leadership equates to 'collaboration,' indicating an interpretation of its principles.

Additionally, most respondents highlighted the importance of 'relationship' in understanding collaborative leadership. LD6 stated, "Collaborative leadership thrives on building relationships." This perspective involves fostering consensus-building and conflict management to reduce operational losses and promote sustainability. Despite recognising the significance of relationships, all respondents noted room for improvement in their workplaces, where employees and departments struggle to establish effective connections. LD11 remarked, "Our company is experiencing individuals and departments operating in silos."

Moreover, most respondents highlighted the perspective of "Breaking Silos" in understanding and practising collaborative leadership. They observed a lack of synergy among departments in their workplaces. Stressing the need to dismantle silos for competitiveness, respondent LD9 succinctly stated, "Collaborative leadership is a new competition. We can only compete if we are collaborating." Similarly, respondent LD11 emphasized the importance of collaboration in addressing systemic organizational and industry issues, stating, "...there are systemic organizational and industry issues that can only be resolved through collaboration."

Further, a fourth perspective on understanding and practising collaborative leadership, as alluded to by most respondents, is "shared goals." LD2 states collaborative leadership involves "working together towards a common goal in the organization." All respondents emphasized that collaborative leadership, observed in their workplaces, entails managers assuming ownership of shared responsibilities and outcomes at both individual and group levels. They agreed that collaborative leadership is evident when employees unite to achieve shared business objectives. Additionally, most respondents stressed that shared goals entail collective efforts towards a common objective. Respondent LD1 elaborated on this perspective: "Collaborative leadership involves company employees working together internally and externally with other companies, devising unified approaches to market risks, ensuring that we do not undermine one another, and developing uniform solutions."

Furthermore, another perspective on understanding and practising collaborative leadership focused on "Leaders' behaviour," as indicated by most respondents. LD7 emphasised this, stating, "...there is an aspect of leaders' behaviour because for collaboration to take place, there are certain elements or actions and behaviours that leaders need to exhibit." Both respondents agreed that the success of collaborative leadership hinges on leaders' ability to cultivate a collaborative environment. They argued that in their workplaces, the efficacy of collaborative leadership depended on the culture shaped by leaders' behaviour.

These behaviours include transparent communication and negotiation between leaders and employees regarding roles and objectives, contributing to shared goals.

Another perspective on understanding and practising collaborative leadership focused on "Top executive's support," as indicated by most respondents. LD4 emphasized the role of top executives in fostering a collaborative leadership culture within their organizations. According to LD4, "As top executives, we play a role in developing a culture of collaboration in our institutions." Most respondents agreed that top executive support could enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and anticipation of customer needs, facilitating the delivery of innovative services. Additionally, they argued that when top executives actively facilitate collaborative leadership, their organizations are likely to be better equipped to improve service delivery, enhance shareholder value, and engage in corporate social responsibility initiatives.

While respondents offered diverse perspectives on understanding and implementing collaborative leadership in their workplaces, the findings collectively indicate a consensus regarding its positive impact on workplace success. The range of perspectives on collaborative leadership understanding underscored the contention raised in the literature review, revealing a lack of coherence and consensus in its conceptualisation across various disciplines. This lack of alignment may account for the respondents' multitude of perspectives on collaborative leadership. The subsequent section explores the perspectives offered by respondents on enhancing collaborative leadership in their workplaces.

Enhancing Collaborative Leadership in the Workplace

Respondents were prompted to articulate their insights into enhancing collaborative leadership within their organisations. Three distinct themes emerged from their responses, elucidating the necessary actions to bolster collaborative leadership in the modern workplace.

Cultivate Authenticity: Most respondents emphasised the importance of "cultivating authenticity" among employees, highlighting a prevalent lack of sincerity within their organizations and the industry. For instance, respondent LD1 noted, "...there is no sincerity at all. That one, I can confirm, may be an issue in our organization, but it is also an industry issue." Moreover, they stressed the pivotal role of authentic relationships among employees in enhancing workplace performance, fostering trust, and instilling a sense of shared responsibility. To address the lack of sincerity, the organization's leadership has initiated internal dialogues among departments, particularly during product development processes, to promote open employee engagement. Respondent LD3 mentioned, "...there have been internal conversations around, do we have the right product solutions for our clients, is our price right? These create internal alignment and accountability and bridge staff engagements and relationships."

Authenticity encompasses various dimensions across communication, collaboration, behaviour, and trust among workplace employees, fostering a shared understanding of values. Most respondents highlighted the significance of internal communication in addressing past issues hindering authenticity in the workplace, particularly concerning competitive attributes among leadership. Respondent LD11 stated, "...so in that respect, from a lack of authenticity point of view, it could be an issue driven by our staff's competitive behaviour. Authenticity internally could also be hindered by past collaboration experience, especially amongst the leaders." Ongoing internal initiatives aim to bridge trust gaps through communication and sensitization of team members, as mentioned by respondent LD9.

Authenticity within the workplace hinges on how individuals present themselves and their actions, with employee behaviour playing a pivotal role in fostering trust among colleagues. Respondents unanimously underscored the crucial role of staff and leadership behaviour in cultivating genuine relationships within the workplace. Respondent LD5 emphasised, "...I think it starts with our leadership. They need to collaborate better and be more authentic around such collaborations...we have had a few issues in the past that negatively impacted our business, but we have intentionally built a culture of trust; it is a work in progress." Ongoing workplace dialogues encourage employees to be mindful of their actions and behaviours towards others.

The study identifies three essential relationships between attributes (sincerity, trust, shared responsibilities, and accountability) of authentic relationships, their influence in the workplace (building effective relationships, eliminating fear and ineffective competitive behaviours), and the role of leadership (fostering dialogue, sensitization on unity of purpose, and driving change leadership) in ensuring workplace success. These findings align with existing research on collaboration strategies to enhance organizational team performance, emphasizing the importance of leveraging employees' talents, expertise, creativity, and skills to address complex organizational challenges (Jacklin-Jarvis & Potter, 2019; Lau, 2020; Maalouf, 2019).

Model Right Behaviours: Most respondents emphasised the critical role of leaders in "modelling the right behaviours" within the workplace. For instance, respondents highlighted the significance of leaders' credibility, particularly concerning issues such as fraud and corruption prevalent in their organizations. Respondent LD3 provided an intriguing insight into the connection between leadership credibility and internal fraud and corruption, stating, "Most of our workplace frauds are perpetrated with the knowledge of leaders...sometimes people do their things, knowing very well they are creating a corrupt system in the organization, and then they still go ahead and do it the way they want... it is a matter of the credibility of the leaders." Additionally, respondent LD2 associated credibility with workplace sustainability and reputation, stating, "for our organization, the credibility of leaders is at the forefront...we have had cases in the past...where some leaders, instead of being objective to grow the business, and safeguard policyholder's money, you find people are selfish, they loot the company."

Accountability in leadership appears to be a widespread concern in various workplaces, impacting overall performance. This issue may stem from the recruitment process of human capital within these organizations. Many workplaces reported recruiting employees for certain departments based on their promises to enhance business outcomes, yet their behaviours may not always align with organizational standards. Implementing an effective accountability mechanism to monitor team productivity and assess leadership effectiveness has been suggested to address this challenge. Moreover, most respondents highlighted the significance of empowering employees with ethics and integrity to address historical workplace issues and restore customer confidence.

Respondent LD5 introduced a compelling perspective on legacy leadership, suggesting that it impedes empowerment and progress within the company. As a long-term solution, the organization is considering investment in change management programs and recruiting new, young leadership. Further, most respondents emphasized listening as a vital organizational asset that can bolster workplace competitive advantage, contingent upon the appropriate leadership mindset. For instance, respondent LD4 underscored, "...the future of

collaboration hinges on the right employee mindset. Leadership that can actively listen to employees regarding organizational goals is crucial." Moreover, listening is connected with trust and communication, which are pivotal for addressing internal workplace issues.

The findings in this section deduce four essential key relationships between attributes of leaders' behaviour (credibility, accountability, integrity, and active listening), their influence in the workplace (minimise unethical issues, foster empowerment, open communication, and inclusion), and the role of leadership in ensuring workplace success. Previous research studies corroborate this study's findings highlighting the crucial leader behaviours that impact organizational success. These behaviours include effective communication, clarity regarding shared goals, creating a supportive workplace environment, fostering employee development, encouraging open feedback, and practising participatory and shared leadership (Ombuna & Obere, 2018; Omobude & Umemezia, 2018). These studies' findings align with the perspectives revealed in the present study, emphasizing the pivotal role of leaders' attributes such as accountability, active listening, credibility, and empowerment in driving organizational success.

Strengthen Top Echelons Support: Most respondents emphasised the necessity of "strengthening top leadership support" within their workplaces, highlighting the significance of establishing a collaborative governance structure. Effective collaborative leadership depends on top leadership's ability to establish the appropriate governance framework, as noted by respondent LD3, who remarked, "...to ensure effective and efficient collaboration, we must establish a governance model that governs internal and external collaboration...while progress has been made, there is room for improvement in this area..." Governance structures involve establishing frameworks and committees facilitating internal discussions at all organizational levels and fostering connections with external stakeholders to address critical workplace performance issues.

Moreover, the alignment of strategies begins at the highest governance echelon. All respondents emphasized the need for a robust collaborative leadership strategy to address workplace performance hurdles. Respondent LD9 stated, "...Our company, as industry leaders, must spearhead creating a robust collaborative leadership strategy... It has been our aspiration, albeit progressing slowly... As one of the top companies regionally, we are devising a plan to address this." Moreover, respondent LD7 highlighted discrepancies in strategy alignment between the board and top management, particularly regarding ethics, impacting overall workplace performance—a sentiment echoed by most respondents.

Further, most respondents highlighted the critical importance of top leadership competence and its influence on executive support. They expressed concerns that many top leadership positions are not filled based on merit but through personal connections. Respondent LD1 stated, "...We urgently need to cultivate competent leaders in executive roles—individuals adept at managing business risks and providing strategic support to ensure seamless operations across different groups... While we have some capable leaders internally, there is a pressing need to enhance competency in the right areas." Moreover, they stressed the imperative for organizations to bolster the capacity and competence of their top leadership and align top leadership, the board, and investors to enhance workplace performance.

The findings in this section deduce three essential key relationships between attributes of top echelons support (developing effective strategies, governance structures, and enhancing competencies), their influence in the workplace (creating unity of purpose and

better connection with internal and external stakeholders), and the role of leadership in ensuring workplace success. These findings align with previous studies revealing that strategy, operational processes, and systems significantly influence organizational performance (Kalei, 2018; Mugo et al., 2016). While there are broad resemblances with existing literature findings, this study focused on specific themes addressing contemporary workplace challenges, as outlined in the literature review.

Contribution to Scholarship

This section discusses the emergent themes identified from participants' narratives and their potential significance in advancing a leadership theory, particularly within collaborative leadership. Three distinct themes have surfaced through thematic analysis, furnishing a structural framework for a theoretical understanding of collaborative leadership, thereby contributing to scholarly discourse. These themes delineate the unique characteristics of collaborative leaders, setting them apart from other leadership paradigms while also serving as foundational pillars of collaborative leadership theory.

Theme One: Collaborative leaders nurture authentic relationships

Authenticity, particularly in relationships within organizations, has garnered attention across various disciplines due to its significant impact on employee interactions and organizational outcomes, as highlighted by Lee and Yeunjae (2017) and Yeunjae and Jeong-Nam (2017). Men and Stacks (2014) note a positive correlation between effective employee relationships and job satisfaction and performance, emphasising the pivotal role of authentic relationships in collaborative leadership, which influences team engagement and overall organizational performance, as discussed by Jiang and Men (2015).

Establishing genuine relationships within organizations requires mutual trust, respect, understanding, and a willingness to learn from diverse perspectives, embodying authenticity in collaborative leadership practices, as Hoogsteen (2020) noted. Continuous dialogue, profound reflection, and active listening are essential components, with consensus-building involving the authentic engagement of team members through mutual respect and understanding, as emphasised by Markle-Reid et al. (2017) and Brock et al. (2017). This authenticity fosters mutual understanding, positively impacting employee and organizational performance, as evidenced by Samwel (2018) and Worlu et al. (2016), underscoring the critical role of leaders in infusing ethical values and facilitating desired outcomes in organizations.

Theme Two: Collaborative leaders exemplify appropriate behaviours

Collaborative leaders continuously harness the diversity of their teams' ideas and opinions to formulate strategies and achieve shared goals, as defined by Archer and Cameron (2013). This study integrates scholarly perspectives to conceptualize collaborative leaders' behaviour in terms of inclusivity, empowerment, and open communication, aiming to enhance the understanding of collaborative leadership and redefine behaviours conducive to performance in contemporary organizations (Goddard et al., 2015). Leaders must cultivate environments characterized by open communication, inclusivity, and empowerment, refraining from relying solely on formal positional power and instead modelling influence in collaborative settings, as suggested by Hoogsteen (2020) and Vaggers and Anderson (2021). Additionally, Wilson (2013) underscores the importance of authenticity, persistence, and clarity as essential behaviours for collaborative leaders, particularly in matrixed-oriented

collaborations requiring relational and inclusive attributes, as highlighted by Endres et al. (2020).

Leaders play a pivotal role in driving empowerment and collaboration within organizations, frequently involving constituents in planning processes to enhance engagement and empower them in decision-making, as Langat et al. (2019) and Okumu & Were (2017) argue. Empowered employees, as asserted by Omobude and Umemezia (2018), are more motivated, exhibit high citizenship behaviours, and demonstrate commitment to higher performance levels, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of empowerment. Open communication, crucial for fostering collaboration, is supported by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) principles and perspectives emphasized in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, as suggested by Dilshani (2015). Additionally, examining the support provided by the top leadership in collaborative leadership and its impact on performance is imperative for modelling authentic organizational relationships.

Theme Three: Support from top echelons enhances collaborative leadership effectiveness

The study findings underscore the crucial support provided by top echelons within organizations, manifesting in governance structures, competence, and strategic initiatives (Berardo et al., 2020). Governance serves as the formal framework guiding collaborative relationships, delineating operational methods, interrelationships, and alignment with shared objectives, distinct from organizational organograms and relational structures, as noted by Archer and Cameron (2013) and Bianchi et al. (2021). Scholars such as Emerson et al. (2012) and Kinder et al. (2021) emphasize its pivotal role as the foundation of collaborative leadership (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015), shaping the collaborative strategy and leadership plan within organizations (Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2020; Kalei, 2018).

Strategy execution in organizations is a collective process driven by top echelons investing resources in developing strategies to achieve organizational goals (Jin et al., 2019). Collaborative leadership strategy involves promoting teamwork and enabling employees to collectively pursue identified shared goals (Markle-Reid et al., 2017), fostering an environment of shared knowledge and innovative solutions that drive change and performance, as suggested by Hargreaves and Elhawary (2020). Embracing structured knowledge management techniques, as Kamau and Kwanya (2019) recommended, enables organizations to gain a competitive edge and adapt to environmental dynamism, reflecting the collaborative strategies organizations employ to foster collaborative leadership amidst evolving workplace dynamics impacting performance.

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the varying implementation of collaborative leadership within insurance companies in Kenya as contemporary workplaces and highlight areas ripe for improvement. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed for considering leadership and management. To effectively implement collaborative leadership with a focus on enhancing performance, leaders must foster an environment characterised by shared values and trust-based relationships among employees. Cultivating mutual understanding and respect is essential for establishing authentic relationships. Moreover, leaders are urged to lead by example, embodying the behaviours they expect from their team members. This includes demonstrating credibility, promoting open communication, practising active listening, fostering inclusiveness, and empowering team members. By

setting a clear standard for collaborative leadership through their actions, leaders can inspire others to follow suit and consequently enhance their organisation's performance.

Further, top executives and board directors in insurance companies should actively endorse and champion collaborative leadership initiatives. This can be achieved by formulating effective governance structures, operational guidelines, and policies. Their commitment to and allocation of resources toward these initiatives signal the importance placed on collaborative leadership efforts within their organisations. Lastly, insurance companies' leaders must remain attuned to the workplace's evolving dynamics and adapt their collaborative leadership approaches and strategies accordingly if they are to enhance their organizations' performance. This entails staying abreast of changes and proactively adjusting their leadership practices to meet the evolving needs of their teams and organisations.

Limitations and Delimitations

The main limitation of this study pertains to researcher subjectivity, an inherent aspect of qualitative research. The objective was to unearth and elucidate emergent themes consistent with interpretivism, constructivism, practical adequacy, and plausibility criteria, as delineated by Cresswell and Creswell (2018). However, upon reflection on the insights garnered from this research, particularly the emergent themes illuminating collaborative leadership, it becomes evident that the interview questions could have been better formulated to align more effectively with the study's objectives. Although this realisation did not arise immediately during the interview phase, it is now apparent that different or supplementary questions could have been posed to participants, potentially enhancing the depth and quality of the study while further bolstering the emergent themes. Such iterative refinement is inherent in qualitative research, constituting an ongoing exploration process through which knowledge and understanding are progressively accrued to underpin a robust theory. Undoubtedly, this study has engendered further inquiries, some of which are expounded upon in the subsequent section, delineating recommendations for future research.

Suggestions for Further Research

Research on collaborative leadership is sparse, particularly in qualitative studies focusing on contemporary workplaces. This study addresses this gap by unveiling three significant themes that warrant further investigation and serve as potential foundations for theoretical development. However, the refinement and strengthening of a collaborative leadership model necessitate additional research to ascertain whether these emerging themes are context-bound or can be observed across various instances of collaborative leadership. It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which was confined to a specific geographic location and workplace setting (insurance companies in Kenya). To broaden the scope and depth of our understanding, future research could explore leaders from diverse workplace contexts, facilitating comparisons to validate or challenge the emergent themes identified here. Furthermore, numerous other avenues exist for inquiry into collaborative leadership, offering opportunities to deepen our comprehension of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

The research delved into exploring collaborative leadership experiences of leaders in selected insurance companies in Kenya. Despite its recognised significance, the study unearthed that collaborative leadership is not consistently and effectively applied in insurance

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companies in Kenya. Furthermore, it underscored the potential for a comprehensive approach to collaborative leadership to enhance sustainable performance and address contemporary workplace dynamics. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to implementing collaborative leadership, which integrates authentic relationships, leaders' behaviours, and support from top management into a unified strategy. When executed effectively, this holistic approach can positively impact organizational performance.

Existing literature suggests a lack of a formal definition or theory of collaborative leadership, adding complexity to its understanding and application. Nonetheless, the study underscores the importance of drawing insights from the experiences of leaders surveyed herein. Key concepts such as authentic relationships, leaders' behaviours, and support from senior management offer practical implications for those aspiring to adopt collaborative leadership practices. While the study aims to contribute to the discourse in leadership scholarship and practice, its value is not contingent on finding a specific audience. Instead, it offers valuable insights into collaborative leadership within contemporary workplaces.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following are recommendations for leadership practice and policy:

Leadership Practice: To enhance sustainable performance, insurance company leaders need to foster authenticity by promoting sincere communication and trust-building initiatives among employees. They should also model the right behaviours by demonstrating credibility, accountability, integrity, and active listening, which are crucial for minimizing unethical issues, fostering empowerment, and promoting open communication in the workplace. They should strengthen top leadership support by establishing collaborative governance structures and aligning strategies to ensure unity of purpose and better connection with internal and external stakeholders.

Policy: Insurance company leaders could develop policies that promote internal dialogues and sensitization programs to address authenticity and trust issues within their organizations. They could also implement accountability mechanisms to monitor team productivity and assess leadership effectiveness. Insurance companies could also establish robust collaborative leadership strategies aligned with top leadership competence and organizational goals.

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