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Employee Commitment on the Relationship between Blue Ocean Leadership Style and Organization Performance

Dr. Jane Chepngeno Sang
Moi University, Kenya.

ABSTRACT

A major ingredient in most non-performing organizations is poor leadership. Blue ocean leadership (BOL) is a new style, which aims to achieve a leap in an organization's leadership, quickly and at low cost, by engaging previously disengaged employees, leading to improved performance. However, a few studies have explored BOL in Kenya's organizations. The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between BOL and organization performance (OP) in four selected companies on Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE) and determine the moderating role of employee commitment (EC) on the relationship. Specifically, the study assessed the effect of BOS on organization performance and determined the moderating role of EC on the relationship. The study first assessed the companies' current ('as-is') leadership canvases, developed alternative leadership states, and selected leadership profiles that could best unlock disengaged employees, which were validated against each company's performance. The sample consisted of 144 employees from the four companies in Eldoret Town, selected from a target population of 224, by stratified random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. Findings showed a significant and positive effect of BOL ($\beta = 0.298$, $p<0.0001$) on OP. Companies which outperformed others had senior managers who delegated duties, removed bureaucratic bottlenecks and spent more time analyzing and espousing the company's future. Middle managers in these companies coached, motivated and served their customers (junior employees), and not their bosses. Employee commitment was found to moderate the relationship between BOL and OP. The study concluded that BOL significantly improves employee commitment and engagement, leading to better OP. Thus, companies should implement BOL to improve their OP.

KEYWORDS: *Blue ocean leadership (BOL), Employee commitment (EC), Organization performance (OP).*

INTRODUCTION

The *raison d'etre* for any business enterprise is to perform. However, there is no unanimity in the definition of organization performance (OP) because of its multidimensionality, subjectiveness, and tenuous theoretical grounding (Hamann & Schiemann, 2021; Richard et al., 2009). Many conceptualizations of organizational performance couple it with meeting targeted objectives. Accordingly, Ahmed and Shaffiq (2014), defined organizational performance as the actual results/outcomes of an organization as measured against its targets. The contemporary notion is that organization performance should combine the constructs of efficiency, effectiveness, and relevancy (Jenatabadi, 2015). This paper conceptualizes organizational performance as an organization's ability to meet its goals and objectives with optimum resources to fulfill relevant stakeholder demands (Ahmed & Shaffiq, 2014; Richard et al., 2009). Businesses are forever locked in competition, each striving to gain a competitive advantage over its rivals. Understanding the antecedents that could provide firms with a competitive advantage and hence drive profitability remains an overriding quest for strategic management research.

In a worldwide study, Gallup (2013) reported that just 13% of an organization's employees are actively committed to doing a good job, while the rest are disengaged (63% merely put their time in while the other 24% sabotage the company, for example, by negatively influencing their coworkers and missing days on job). In the US, the actively disengaged group (comprising about 20% of the employees) costs the U.S. economy around half a trillion dollars each year. The major cause for this colossal employee disengagement, is poor leadership (Gallup, 2013). Good leadership is thus necessary to bridge the vast gulf between the potential and the realized talent and energy of a firm's employees. Authors, for instance, Bhargavi and Yaseen (2016) and Obiwuru et al. (2011) have argued that the leadership style in an organization is one of the factors that play significant role in enhancing or retarding the interest and commitment of the individuals in the organization.

According to W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne (2014), poor leaders do not clearly understand the changes required to bring out the best in everyone and achieve high performance. What leaders need was a new style they termed "blue ocean leadership" (BOL), which borrows from their research on blue ocean strategy (BOS), the model for creating uncontested market spaces by converting noncustomers into customers (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004). Blue ocean leadership essentially applies the concepts and analytic frameworks of BOS to help leaders release the blue ocean of unexploited talent and energy in the companies, rapidly and at low cost. Leadership, at its core, can be thought of as a service that people in an organization can buy or not. Leaders, thus, have customers: bosses whom they report to and juniors who look up to them for guidance. When employees value a leader's practices at work, they in effect buy into the leadership. Such workers strive to excel, act with commitment, and become customers. On the other hand, when employees do not buy into a particular leadership, they disengage and become noncustomers (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The central idea of BOL is to attain a leap in an organization's leadership, quickly and at low cost, by converting unengaged employees to engaged ones, leading to improved performance. Nonetheless, a paucity of studies has explored BOL in Kenya's organizations.

Blue ocean leadership envisages a radical improvement in employee commitment (EC). Meyer and Allen (1990: 67) defined EC as "the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization". Clearly, EC can be conceptualized as force binding an individual to an organization, and making them belabor on its behalf. Zheng (2010) describes EC as the willingness of employees to hang on to a course of action and refusal to change plans, often due to a sense of obligation to stay the course. This study adopts Mowday et al. (1982: 27)'s definition of employee commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization and can be characterized by a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and a strong desire to maintain membership of the organization". Employee commitment has been found to reduce withdrawal behaviour, for instance, lateness, absenteeism, and turnover, leading to enhanced overall organizational performance. Employee commitment has been found to improve job performance, total return to shareholders, sales, decrease intention to leave and search for alternative employment (Khan, Naseem& Masood, 2016; Ahmad & Rainyee, 2014; Khan, Ziauddin, Jam &Ramay, 2010). Few studies have looked at the relationship between BOL, EC, and OG.

This study aimed to determine the relationship between blue ocean leadership and organization performance in four selected companies in Eldoret Town and determine the moderating role of employee commitment on the relationship. The study focused on the following research objectives: (I) to assess the effect of BOL on organization performance; and (II) determine the moderating role of EC on the relationship between BOL and OP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews both conceptual and empirical literature related to the study.

Blue Ocean Leadership

Three salient features distinguish BOL from traditional leadership models. BOL focuses on acts and activities leaders need to undertake to increase their employees' motivation and results rather than the leader's personality. This is because whereas it is easier to change what a leader does or does not do, it is infinitely harder and slow to change their values, qualities, and behavioral styles. Secondly, ideas of BOL apply to leaders at all levels of an organization (distributive leadership) and not just senior leaders. Empowering junior leaders with BOL will, especially, unleash the latent talent and drive of a substantial mass of employees, with whom they interact. Lastly, BOL emphasizes the connection to an organization's market and business realities by incorporating employees who directly deal with the markets in designing programs that help best serve key stakeholders (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014).

A four-step process is followed to achieve BOL. The first step is to assess an organization's current leadership reality, that is, the *as-is* state, which is visualized by plotting a Leadership Canvas. The customers of leaders are asked to name acts and activities, good and bad, which their leaders spend most time on, which are then plotted on the horizontal axis. The frequency with which they carry out each act and activity is then plotted on the vertical axis. Joining the levels of all the activities using a line yields the *as-is* Leadership Canvas (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The second step is to develop alternative leadership profiles. This is done, again, by asking employees to name acts and activities on the canvas which leaders spent a lot of time but are of little or no value ('cold spots') and those which could energize employees and inspire them to apply their talents, but are seldom or never practiced ('hot spots'). The responses are processed into a tool termed Blue Ocean Leadership Grid, which has four quadrants: Eliminate, Reduce, Raise and Create. The cold-spot activities are mapped into either the Eliminate (acts and activities a firm should totally remove) or Reduce (those that must be decreased below their current level) quadrants while the hot-spot activities are plotted into either the Raise (those that must should be raised well above their current level) or Create (those that should be done that currently are not) (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). In the third step, a leaders' fair is held, where multiple as-is leadership profiles are shared and voted on to decide on the best leadership style for the organization. Finally, once the new leadership style is identified, it is institutionalized throughout the organization by explaining it to employees, developing appropriate programs and reviewing its implementation on a monthly basis (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014).

In a study of 2580 lecturers from 22 vocational colleges in Malaysia during Covid-19 pandemic, Jian et al. (2020) found high levels of blue ocean leadership, employee engagement, and team performance amongst them. However, no attempt was made to establish causal relationships among the constructs. Zakaria et al. (2017) found a significant and positive correlation between BOL attributes and employee engagement, except idealized influence, passion, strategic thinking/planner, innovate, and willingness to change. The study did not, however, use EC as a variable. Studies conducted in Kenya, for instance, Chepngeno and Kimitei (2021), and Mwende (2016), focused on blue ocean strategies rather than BOL.

Employee Commitment

Organizational commitment has widely been examined in managerial literature due to its significance in organizational performance. According to Armstrong (2009), EC is closely intertwined with organizational citizenship and comprises of three facets: a strong desire to remain a member of the organization; a strong belief in, and acceptance of the values and goals of the organization; and a readiness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization. There is a duality of approaches to EC: exchange and psychological. The exchange approach views commitment as an act of inducement, and is further classifiable into behavioral (EC is based on cost benefit analysis) and attribution (employee perceptions about management intentions) approaches (Nishii et al., 2008). The psychological approach considers EC as an attitude towards organization that links the identity of the person to organization (Gujral & Singh, 2019).

Employee commitment has evolved from a unidimensional, behavioural perspective in the 1960s to become a contemporary multidimensional, complex construct. Allen and Meyer (1990) developed one of the earliest models of employee commitment, consisting of three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Employees with a strong affective commitment remain with the organization because they want to do so (desire); those with strong normative commitment stay because they feel they ought to (moral obligation); and those with strong continuance commitment stay because they have to do so (recognition of the costs). O'Malley (2000), in a consideration of an organisation's social environment, proposed a five-dimensional model: affiliative (the interests and values of an organisation merge with those of an employee), associative (the employment increases self-esteem and status), moral, affective, and structural commitments (similar to normative, affective, and continuance commitments in Allen and Meyer's (1990) model). This study adopted Allen and Meyer's (1990) model, which has been used by many researchers, for instance, Bonds (2017), Radosavljevic et al. (2017), and Simo et al. (2014).

Hafiz (2017) examined the relationship between the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, normative and continuance) and employee's performance in banking sector of Lahore, Pakistan. Data were collected from 213 respondents at management level from several private and public banks, using structured questionnaires. All the dimensions were found to independently and jointly influenced employee performance. Irefin and Mohammed (2014) investigated the effect of employee commitment on organizational performance and employee turnover amongst employees working in Coca Cola Nigeria Limited. A large, significant and positive correlation between employee commitment and organisational performance was found. In a study of employees of Licensed Finance Companies (LFCs) in Sri Lanka, Bandula and Jayatilake (2016) reported that continuance commitment was the component that influenced job performance the most. In research conducted at Kenya Institute of Surveying and Mapping, Wambugu (2010), found that most employees were highly committed and valued most their careers, followed by their job, organization and lastly, their supervisor. However, the study found a negative correlation between career commitment and job performance. None of these studies show a link between BOL, EC and OP. In addition, some of them suggest that the relationship between EC and OP may not always be linear.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data from students. The scale of items ranged from a minimum of unity (strongly disagree) and a maximum of 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach alpha coefficient test was employed to measure the internal consistency of the sub variables/items making up the three constructs in the study. Field work was conducted from 10th to 28th of November, 2022.

Hierarchical multiple linear regression (MLR) was used to test both the direct and indirect effects in the study, following guidelines by Dawson (2014). In the first step, OP was regressed on BOL (Model *I*), to assess objective one of the study. In the second step, the moderator variable (EC) was entered (Model *II*). Finally, the interaction term (the product of BOL and EC) was entered (Model *III*) to determine the moderating role of EC on the relationship between BOL and OP (Dawson, 2014).

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \varepsilon \text{ .... Model } I$$

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \varepsilon \text{ .... Model } II$$

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \beta_3 X.Z + \varepsilon \text{ .... Model } III$$

Where Y is organization performance; β_0 is the regression constant; β_1, β_2, and β_3, are coefficients to be estimated; X is BOL; Z is EC; while ε is an error term.

The key assumptions of MLR are as follows. First, linearity supposes that the dependent variable is a linear function of a set of predictor variable and the error term. Secondly, errors have the same variance (homoscedastic) and are not related with one another (nonautocorrelated). Lastly, there is no multicollinearity, that is, no exact linear relationship among independents (Chatterjee and Simonoff, 2012; Green, 2008). All statistical tests were two-tailed. Significant levels were measured at 95% confidence level with significant differences recorded at p<0.05.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Of the 144 questionnaires e-mailed to employees of the five companies, 119 (82.63%) were returned. Most respondents were employees (*n*=67, 56%), followed by middle-level managers (*n*=31, 26%), and top-level managers (*n*=21, 18%). Degree holders (*n*=78, 85%) were the largest, followed by those with diploma (*n*=23, 19%), masters and PhDs (each, *n*=9, 8%).

Descriptive Results of Blue Ocean Leadership Practices

Table 1 presents the descriptive results for BOL practices in the sample companies.

Table 1. Blue leadership practices in sample companies

BOL Practice	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Reward hard work and creativity	2	5	4.16	.873
Leaders motivate subordinates	2	5	3.88	1.310
Leaders like delegating work	2	5	3.87	1.314
Leaders set performance goals with subordinates	1	5	3.79	1.131
Leaders train, coach and explain company's strategy	2	5	3.38	1.098
Leaders spent time on unimportant things	2	5	3.26	1.242
The vision in our company is to challenge the ordinary	1	5	2.41	1.279
Leaders analyse future trends	1	5	2.34	1.049
We interact and exchange ideas with senior managers	1	5	2.23	1.127
Leaders encourage innovation	1	5	2.02	1.150

Key: Min=minimum, max.=maximum, Std. dev.=standard deviation

Cronbach Alpha: 0.870

Most companies were found to reward hard work and creativity (mean=4.16), leaders motivated subordinates (3.88), liked to delegate work (3.87), and set performance goals with subordinates (3.79). However, leaders in most of the companies did not encourage innovation (2.02), rarely interacted with junior employees (2.23), did not analyse future trends (2.34), and the vison for the company was not to challenge the ordinary (2.41). The study also found that significant proportions of employees thought that leaders spent a lot of time on unimportant things (3.26) and did not train, coach and explain the company's strategy to juniors (3.38).

The Cronbach alpha (0.870) was high for the ten items, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. When principal components factor analysis (FA) was conducted using varimax rotation, a single component, with an Eigen Value of 73.608%, was extracted, suggesting the items represented one construct. Consequently, the variable, BOL, was computed by summing up all subitems and taking an average.

The As-Is leadership profile for the companies in the study is displayed in Figure 1.

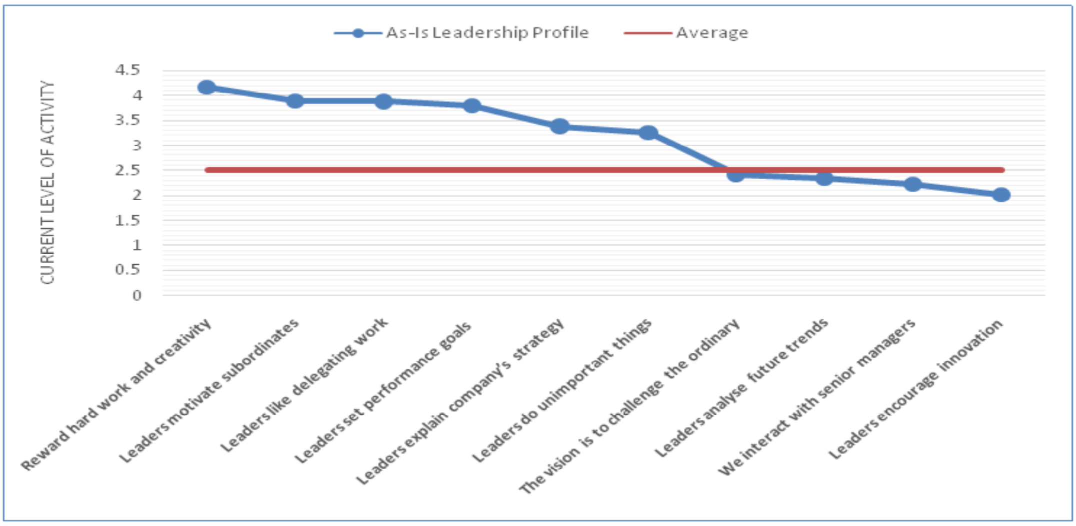

Figure 1. As-Is leadership profile for the companies in the study

The canvas shows, succinctly, that the below average acts and activities that leaders engage include not encouraging innovation, rarely interacting with junior employees, not analyzing future trends, and having a banal vison for the company.

Descriptive Results of Employee Commitment

Table 2 presents the descriptive results for employee commitment in the sample companies.

Table 2. Employee commitment in the sample companies

AC (*n*=119, mean=3.44, Cronbach=0.878)	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**
I feel the desire to make great effort to achieve the objectives of the company	2	5	4.15	1.117
There is emotional attachment to company	2	5	4.02	1.049
I feel company's problems are mine	2	5	3.78	0.957
I do not want to work for another company	1	5	2.79	0.981
I feel as if I was working in a family atmosphere	1	5	2.47	1.127
CC (*n*=119, mean= 3.05, Cronbach=0.732)	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**
I strongly care about the future of the company	2	5	4.28	1.033
I want to stay no matter what other alternative opportunities are available to me	1	5	3.10	0.967
I belong to the place I work	1	5	2.58	0.897
Leaving my work in this company causes problems in my life	1	5	2.23	1.143
NC (n=119, mean=2.91, Cronbach=0.658)	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**
Continued loyalty is a moral value	2	5	4.17	1.203
Commitment is a moral obligation	1	5	3.02	1.165
I would feel guilty if a left the company	1	5	2.34	0.981
I consider moving from one company to another as being immoral	1	5	2.10	1.203

Key: Min=minimum, max.=maximum, Std. dev.=standard deviation, AC, CC, and NC=affective, continuance, and normative commitment, respectively.

Cronbach (Overall): 0.925

Most employees felt the desire to make great effort to achieve the company's objectives (mean=4.15), emotionally attached to the company (4.02) and felt the company's problems as their own (3.78). Nonetheless, substantial proportions of employees did not mind working for another company (2.79) and did not feel a family atmosphere at the place of work (2.47). For continuance commitment, although most workers strongly care about the company (4.28) and want to stay (3.10), significant fractions also felt that they do not belong to their work places (2.58) and leaving the company will not cause problems in their life (2.23). Most employees consider continued loyalty and commitment a moral value (4.17) and a moral obligation (3.02), respectively. However, most do not consider moving from one company to another as being immoral (2.10) nor do they feel guilty when they leave (2.34).

The means for affective, continuance, and normative commitments were 3.44, 3.05, and 2.91, respectively, which showed that the strongest commitment shown by employees was affective, followed by continuance, lastly, normative. The overall Cronbach value was 0.925, suggesting that all items could be included in the computation of EC variable.

Descriptive Results of Organization Performance

Table 3 presents the descriptive results for organization performance in the sampled companies.

Table 3. Organization performance in the sample companies

Organization Performance	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**
We are the most innovative company in our sector	1	5	3.95	1.171
The company has seen rapid growth in profitability	2	5	3.89	0.998
The company has seen rapid growth in market share	2	5	3.89	1.007
Our customers are very satisfied	2	5	3.76	0.939
Company introduces new products and services	1	5	2.20	1.246
Other companies copy our products	1	5	2.13	1.312

Key: Min=minimum, max.=maximum, Std. dev.=standard deviation

Cronbach Alpha: 0.787

Most employees thought that their companies were the most innovative (mean=3.95), had seen rapid growth in profitability (3.89), market share (3.89), and that their customers were very satisfied (3.76). However, most workers did not think that their company introduces new products and services (2.20) nor that other companies copied their products (2.13). The large standard deviation for these items suggested a wide variability in the answers given. The items measuring OP were fairly consistent (Cronbach = 0.787). Consequently, they were summed and averaged.to yield the variable, OP.

Blue Ocean Leadership Grid

The blue ocean leadership grid of the sample companies is displayed in Figure 2.

Eliminate	Raise
1. Routine/long meetings that have no value (5)	1. Training, coaching, and mentoring new hires (5)
2. Micromanaging staff/a lot of supervision (4)	2. Rewarding achievement of employees (4)
3. Blame game and office politics (2)	3. Team building (3)
4. Dismissing ideas of others (2)	4. Digitization and systemization of processes (2)
5. Poor conflict resolution skills (2)	5. Stakeholder engagements (2)
6. Repetitive and monotonous work (1)	6. Mentoring and talent management (2)
	7. Top management to wake up (2)
Reduce	**Create**
1. Failing to delegate (5)	1. Appreciate uniqueness & focus on individual (5)
2. Blaming others/not owning up for mistake (5)	2. R & D in new ventures/technology (5)
3. Poor decision making and transfers (4)	3. Create /research/diversify on new markets (5)
4. Not valuing employees(3)	4. Invest and develop employees (5)
5. Daily appraisals (1)	5. Humility in leadership (3)
	6. Strategic planning implementation (2)
	7. Family welfare and pension packages (2)
	8. Enhance transparency/clear communication (1)

Figure 2. Blue ocean leadership grid of the sample companies (numbers in parentheses are mean frequencies (Maximum=5, minimum=1).

Most respondents felt that leaders should eliminate routine/long meetings that have no value, micromanaging staff, blaming others, dismissing ideas of others, not resolving conflicts and repetitive and monotonous work. The acts and activities that should be reduced were failing to delegate, blaming others, poor decisions, not valuing employees and daily appraisals. The activities that should be increased included training and coaching new employees, rewarding those who work hard, team building, digitization, stakeholder engagement, and talent management. On the other hand, were expected to appreciate uniqueness and focus on individuals, research and development to produce new products, create new markets, invest in development and welfare of employees, humility in leadership, and implementation of strategic planning.

Multiple Linear Regression Results

The assumptions of MLR were, first, tested. The highest Cook's distance was 0.07 while the maximum leverage value was 0.03, which were less than one and two, respectively, showing that no single case exerted undue influence on regression coefficients, hence, there was likely to be no outliers in the data. A plot between residuals against fitted values in the regression models showed the errors to be randomly scattered, with no discernible pattern, indicating homoscedasticity. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.968, which was between one and three, suggesting that the errors were not correlated. Tolerance values for all the independent variables ranged between 0.447 and 0.703, indicating that multicollinearity was unlikely to be a problem.

The results of the MLR are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of MLR regression on effects of EC on the relationship between BOL and OP

Variable	Step I			Step II			Step III		
	B	*β*	*t*	*B*	*β*	*t*	*B*	*β*	*t*
Main effects									
(Constant)	0.58(.17)		3.29***	0.54(.18)		2.98***	-5.66(.79)		-7.14***
BOL	0.89(.04)	0.87	19.30***	0.99(.13)	0.97	7.66***	2.81(.25)	2.24	11.19***
Moderator									
EC				-0.09(.11)	-0.11	-0.86ns	1.71(.24)	1.12	7.08***
Interaction Term									
BOL x EC							-0.49(.06)	-0.28	-7.96***
R^2	0.763			0.764			0.84.84		
Adjusted R^2	0.761			0.760			0.84.82		
F Change	372.65			0.736			63.43		

Key: SE = standard error. *, **, and *** = *t* value significant at the ten, five and one percent levels of probability, respectively.

The estimated equation for the linear model can thus be written as:

This study aimed to determine the relationship between blue ocean leadership and organization performance in four selected companies in Eldoret Town and determine the moderating role of employee commitment on the relationship. The study focused on the following research objectives: (I) to assess the effect of BOL on organization performance; and (II) determine the moderating role of EC on the relationship between BOL and OP.

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