



## Research article

## Addressing operational complexities through re-inventing leadership style: A systemic leadership intervention

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates leadership practice in private organisations in Nigeria. It focuses on learning about the application of leadership styles to address operational complexities in organisations. The research is based on a case study of a commercial livestock farm in Nigeria using systemic intervention as the methodology. Data collection tools, such as a workshop, semi-structured interviews, boundary setting and participant observation, were applied. Key leadership issues identified in the case study were addressed via the creation of an effective approach from different leadership underpinnings. Part of the findings is the difficulty in sustaining the implementation of a particular leadership style(s) due to unstructured nature of complexities involved in the determination of suitable leadership style at different stages of the research. The research wrapped up with the suggestion for further research on systemic leadership intervention to consider exploring the public sector, as well as the need to further review on the use of CATWOE in the research process, to avoid the occurrence of marginalisation in its application.

## 1. Introduction

The drive to attain a practical leadership approach is fundamental for every business leader, especially those in the private sector of Nigeria. Extant literature has recognised various leadership styles that have been widely applied to suit emerging business needs at different times (Musa et al., 2018; Israel, 2018). Among these are the autocratic and democratic leadership styles which are the focus of this research paper. As organisations operate in an open system, where they have minimal control over the emergent societal problems arising from their interactions with the environments, many leaders discover that there are a lot of complexities in leadership practices (Sinha, 1984; Jackson, 2000, 2003; Zagorsek et al., 2004; Grint, 2005; Schneider and Somers, 2006; Anderson and Sun, 2017).

The qualitative approach is adopted to explore the topic from the perspective of selected participants who engage in leadership practice in the Nigerian private sector. It is based on a case study of a commercial livestock farm. Leadership researchers (e.g. Blanchard et al., 1993; Aronson, 2001; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Björkman and Lervik, 2007; Maria Stock et al., 2017; Ibeh and Makhmadshoev, 2018), who focused their research studies more on large and multinational organisations, and

the public sectors. This research, therefore, seeks to investigate leadership practice in private organisations in Nigeria. It focuses on learning about the application of leadership styles and organisational complexities, particularly within the private business where the owners wholly bear the risks. It explores the operational factors that inform the adoption of given leadership approaches in operations. While there tend to be critical contextual issues that could project sentimental leadership decisions in terms of leadership style and approaches, organisations seem to drive towards sustainability. The current research adopts a pragmatic leadership, thinking that embraces the reinvention of existing leadership style(s) to match emerging complex issues.

## 2. Leadership and complexity in private businesses practice

The practice of leadership principles and the quest to address operational challenges are a daily practice among business organisations in Nigeria, applying different approaches ranging from democratic, autocratic to laissez-faire (Akata, 2008; Akata and Renner, 2009; Ibukun et al., 2011; Brogaard and Petersen, 2017; Inyang, 2017; Jauro et al., 2017). For instance, situational leadership practitioners and writers have emphasised on the adaptation of chosen leadership style to suit and

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address specific context (Graeff, 1997; Sosik and Godshalk, 2000; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2005; Cummings et al., 2010; Lynch et al., 2018). However, due to their pursuit of profitability objective, an average Nigerian private business leader seems to be more conversant with the autocratic leadership style. This offers the opportunity to dictate their policy approach to addressing issues to their followership (Odusami et al., 2003; Zagorsek et al., 2004; Van de Vliert, 2006; Adeyemi, 2010; Ojokuku et al., 2012). The above could be traceable to the autocratic leaders' interest in 'position power' to control the operational process (Bontis, 2001; Akhator, 2002; Seddon, 2003; Ufua, 2015). Nevertheless, they sometimes fail to recognize that they can source productive ideas from their subordinates, who are willing to provide them with relevant advice and support if allowed to do so (Ufua et al., 2018; Ibadunni et al., 2019).

In their study, Fasola et al. (2013) rate the impact of transactional leadership style higher than transformational style on employees' commitment in the Nigerian Banking sector. They recommend that managers should positively reward employees with praise or recognition when they perform at or above expectations, negative rewarding approach when performance is below the expected standard. Similarly, Hetland et al. (2018) in their research on transformational leadership, suggest the use of employee focus approach to enhance organisational members' commitment to addressing identified organisational complexities. This could also facilitate proactive behaviours among organisation members and leaders in making effective decisions about operational practices.

Besides, the Nigerian business leaders also consider democratic leadership in their operations in order to encourage joint effort across ranks in an operational process to jointly identify and address issues (Hannah et al., 2011; Oyedele and Firat, 2018). Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar (2018) in their reflection on the leader-member exchange theory, reckon that the impact of leadership effectiveness in an organisation is dependent on the relationship between leaders and followers which also informs the degree of commitment to job performance. They acknowledge the significance of key leadership factors such as the perception of leadership issues, and the motivation of organisational members. They affirm that effective leadership practice requires a multiplicity of factors to suit business environmental complexities in an organisation. Moreover, Martin et al. (2018), identified key factors including shared leadership practices, leaders' personality composition and work complexity, to have a positive relationship between leadership and team performance.

Advocates of effective leadership practice emphasize on leader's behavioural exertions that are required to enhance the followers' confidence in their commitment to the pursuit of set leadership goals. This leaves the leaders with the task of positive behavioural disposition which can form a tacit learning platform for the followers in organisations (Nonaka and Toyama, 2015). It also underlines the fact that the practice of organisational leadership seems to have gone beyond mere transactional practices such as motivation and rewards. These include extended positive acts such as pro-social behaviours, continuous self-development that can inform compliance in addressing complex issues and surpassing beyond expectations, across the operational structure of an organisation (Hannah et al., 2014; Beerbohm, 2015; Hoh et al., 2019).

This narrative raises the question of whether there can be a complete adoption of a sustainable leadership style, especially among these private businesses? Or whether leaders can overcome complexity by re-invention of these leadership styles? This paper supports the latter option because of the apparent reality about the inherent complexity in today's business world. A developing economy, such as Nigeria, requires continuous modification or re-invention of accepted leadership style/s, to match these complexities (Lichtenstein, 2000; Liamputtong and Ezy, 2005; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Walby, 2007; Zelt et al., 2017).

### 3. Methodology

This research applied a qualitative approach to explore leadership practice in the Nigerian private sector, focusing on a case study of a

commercial livestock farm. This work unearths learning about the critical considerations among organisational leaders in their choice of leadership approach to addressing identified operational problems. Systemic intervention is adopted as the underpinning methodology (Midgley and Pinzón (2013); Hester and MacG, 2017; Ufua and Adebayo (2019); Oyebola et al. (2019). It embraces collaboration among participants to identify and explore complex situations within a mutually agreed ethical framework (see, Rapoport, 1970; while Schultz and Hatch, 1996; Walsh et al., 2007; McKernan, 2013; McNiff, 2013; Ufua, 2015). Intervention in this context entails a joint purposeful action engaged in by participants in the research process to create desired change (Midgley, 1997, 2000, 2003; Córdoba and Midgley, 2008; Midgley and Ochoa-Arias, 2012; Midgley and Pinzón, 2013).

The current research aligns with the interpretive paradigm, which thrives on joint interpretation and subjective measurement, based on due consideration to participants' judgment of social research variables (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). This research supports the use of different types of leadership styles to create an effective leadership approach that suits the challenge and interest of the stakeholders (Mohamudat, 2010). A single case study of a commercial livestock farm is applied. The aforementioned is because most leadership projects including the current research, tend to possess unique features and specific cultural characteristics traceable to a given case (see, Yin, 1994, 2004, 2009; Allan et al., 2008; Rendtorff, 2015). The research process took eight months of engagement with identified participants to gather information in the case study organisation.

A formal ethical clearance was secured from Covenant Health, Research, Ethics Committee of Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria<sup>1</sup>. The various methods of data gathering were engaged with conscious attention to other relevant ethical requirements. In alignment with the suggestions of researchers on the values of formal research practices (e.g., Allmark et al., 2009), the researchers ensured that the participation was voluntary and confidential. The participants were not coerced against their wish all through the research. Similarly, the consent of the case study organisation was formally secured to authenticate the ethical credibility in the entire research process (see, Reinhartz, 2017; Roulston and Choi, 2018).

#### 3.1. The case study organisation

A commercial farm located in southern Nigeria was used as a case study for this research. The farm was established as a positive response to the Nigerian Federal Government's demand for individuals and corporate organisations to invest in the agricultural sector in order to address food security and youth unemployment challenges and boost the Nigerian economy agricultural sector.

At its early stage, the farm-focused only on poultry farming and later expanded into other livestock farming. The farm provides employment opportunity to the host community youth. Apart from the host community, the farm has other vital stakeholders. These include local farmers, who buy their poultry dung for subsistent vegetable farming, local traders, who trade on their products (e.g., table eggs, live poultry birds), and input material suppliers. The organisation also has a range of wholesale and retail customers for the farm's different products. Internal stakeholders include the farm Middle Managers, Supervisors, Senior Managers and the Top Management.

Currently, the sections operated by the farm include Cattle Ranch, Piggery, Hatchery and Poultry Production section, Snailery, Fishery, and Feed Mill. They focus on meeting downstream market demands, by maintaining a strong expansionary vision, aimed to produce quality commercial farm products for the target market (see, Ufua et al., 2018).

<sup>1</sup> The ethical clearance was submitted to the publishers as supplementary document.

### 3.2. Methods

The research used different methods to gather data. These were applied in gathering data on a complimentary basis through the data collection process. These are explained in this section.

CATWOE is a mnemonic from soft systems methodology (SSM), which is used in exploring the parameters as regards possible transformation in a research process. It facilitates understanding amongst stakeholders (Wilson, 1984; Checkland, 1999; Bergvall-Kåreborn et al., 2004; Checkland and Poulter, 2006; Dalkin et al., 2019). CATWOE stands for:

**Customers:** those who could either benefit from or be harmed by research findings.

**Actors:** these individuals would need to be part of making decisions in a research intervention.

**Transformation:** specification of the desired state and current undesirable state in which the stakeholders of a research process want to see.

**Weltanschauung:** this refers to the particular viewpoint from which the transformation is significant.

**Owners:** these refer to those stakeholders who could either support or stop the research or its findings from execution.

**Environmental constraints:** These are those variables that affect the research process which cannot or should not be changed. Participants in a research process can only manage them (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Dalkin et al., 2019).

Researchers (e.g. Mingers, 1992; Basden and Wood-Harper, 2006), argue against the use of CATWOE, noting that it cannot efficiently deal with conflict. In this research, CATWOE was engaged as a benchmark for the selection of relevant participants. In other words, only stakeholders who were affected or involved in the operational systems of the case study organisation, based on CATWOE were considered for participation in the research process. A critical participant selection question was whether a potential participant's functions as one or more of CATWOE framework? This was meant to ensure that the research data were gathered from the right participants at each stage of data collection.

**Semi-structured interviews:** personal interviews with key participants were conducted at the inception of data collection in the research. These respondents provided crucial information about leadership operations in the case study organisation, and their relationship with external stakeholders, in the food production sector. To source adequate information, these respondents were asked about other relevant stakeholders that could be interviewed, especially those who could have different perspectives about their operations (Midgley and Milne, 1995; Midgley et al., 1998; Dick, 1999; Ufua et al., 2019).

**Participant Observation:** conversations heard and relevant activities were seen among participants which the researchers could not have been aware of in more formal interviews and workshops. Participation also allows the researchers to familiarize and ask further relevant interview questions for necessary clarifications.

**Boundary setting:** after the initial interviews had been conducted, some boundaries were set to ensure that the crucial issues discussed were those agreed upon with the participants. The confidentiality of what had been disclosed in the initial interviews, covering issues bothering on leadership power relations and other operational issues were preserved. Boundaries were built to reflect issues of common interest among the research participants (see, Midgley, 2000; Córdoba and Midgley, 2006; Ufua et al., 2015; Ufua et al., 2018). This equally reflected trust and motivation for participants to freely participate in the research. Participants' right to withdrawal from participation was also emphasised to ensure ethical balance, and unforced participation in the research (see, Saunders et al., 2003; Marczyk et al., 2005).

**Workshops:** relevant stakeholders were engaged in workshop sessions. A total of 20 different workshop sessions, which lasted on an average of 70 min were held. The workshop provided an avenue for several contributors to be involved in essential deliberations in the research (see, Hinnes et al., 2004; Ufua and Adebayo, 2019).

## 4. Key leadership issues identified in the research

### 4.1. Failure to allow Junior staff to attend faith worship services

Some of the critical responses to personal interviews with some Junior staff of the case study organisation was the challenge relating to Junior staff religious belief. The interviewees who were chosen at a random complaint about the Top Management's negligence to their religious practices. They contend that managers do not consent to their attending church services and the non-Christians are also not allowed to attend traditional festive activities due to work demands.

According to a Junior staff respondent at the cattle ranch, "We feel terrible about our inability to attend church services".

An agreement for a workshop was reached with the Assistant General Manager, who manages daily operations on the farm. A two-hour workshop, attended by top executives and other senior administrative staff was conveyed. These participants were mainly owners under CATWOE, those stakeholders who have the leadership authority to decide on the topic discussed. The researchers assumed the role of a facilitator, allowing full deliberation among participants.

During the discussion, the Piggery department manager noted that this religious issue is irrelevant to their operational challenges, that all Junior staff are allowed one off-duty day every week. He thus could not see the reason for the workshop to continue with the topic. However, one of the managers then intervened, suggesting that every issue raised should be allowed for deliberation.

"This issue is indeed creating a negative impression across our organisational structure. I heard some Junior staff clearly expressing their grievance with the disapproval by the Top Management to their wish to attend church services. I think we can make relevant adjustments to resolve it" (Veterinary Consultant).

The Hatchery manager then suggested a solution: a 'skip a day' practice in livestock farming, which allows up to 24-hour deprivation of livestock food without harming them (see, Santoso et al., 1995; Saffar and Khajali, 2010; Wilson et al., 2018). Other participants explained that, by this practice, the affected Junior staff can get the consent of the Top Management to attend to services on their worship days. He reminded participants of some managers who were part of a team that had previously discussed the skip a day model with the Top Management in the recent past, and nothing was done about the implementation of the idea (see, Wilson and Harms, 1986; Wilson et al., 1989; Costa, 1981; Decuyper et al., 2010 for more details about skip a day practice). At the close of the session, participants jointly advised the Top Management to reassess the 'skip a day' model in order to create a win-win for the Junior staff and the animals, in regards to the issue discussed.

The General Manager, in a later interview, told the researchers that the Top Management had agreed to allow the Junior staff to attend church services. However, he also noted that while this new development is predicated on Top Management's awareness of the skip a day model, the Junior staff would not be allowed to go off work entirely on Sundays, or Fridays for the Muslims. He explained that they must resume after their services so that they could feed the livestock.

### 4.2. Aggressive relationships between Middle Managers and Junior staff

The researchers' observed that senior staff frequently used aggressive communication style while on duties. This numerously occurred when

team leaders addressed their subordinates, especially the Junior staff in the various sections of the farm. These could be termed as customers under CATWOE because they stand to benefit or hurt from any changes that may develop from the process (see, [Checkland, 1981](#); [Checkland and Poulter, 2006](#); [Ufua and Adebayo, 2019](#)).

*“Supervisors and Middle Managers do take on an aggressive approach to establish control and conformity to instructions”* (Junior staff in the Fishery department). Furthermore, it was observed on a few occasions that the subordinates reacted with palpable fear, and the researchers' interpretation was that they felt threatened. A follow-up round of interviews was conducted with Junior staff, drawn from the Transport Unit, the Feed Mill Sales and Marketing, and the Production section. The interviewees widely criticized aggression. In addition to making them fearful at work, they noted that it had affected their level of productivity, resulting in lots of errors and mistakes. They said it was partially responsible for the frequent incidence of accidents and damages to the products such as eggs breakage, and tools used at work.

Interviewees also pointed out that the aggression among Middle Managers were a commonly created problems embedded in teamwork, as workers were constantly nervous and would blame one another for errors. This meant that most workers felt insecure and trust-building in work teams was difficult. They pointed out that, in such an environment, only a few Junior staff dared to participate actively in operational team assignments. When the issue was raised in an interview with a female senior officer in the marketing and sales, she simply replied, *“we do not pet anyone here!”*

Later, the researchers met with a Top Management staff in an interview, and he asked for the issue to be dropped as their operation would not allow any further investigation regarding aggression, noting that the entire organisation finds usefulness in their current relationships across the operational structure.

#### 4.3. Delays in the arrival of input materials

The Feed Mill department told the researchers in an interview that the case study farm has the challenge of delays in the arrival of crucial input materials from the distanced suppliers. As a result of this, the farm has started sourcing some of these input materials from retailers at higher costs and insufficient quantity to cover the gap of delays and address the high risk of stock out to livestock. He noted that the delay experienced so far is due to the long distance involved with sourcing these materials from the northern parts of the country. According to the Supervisor at the Feed Mill, *“we turn to alternative sources when we don't get the arrival of our bulk material inventory. This is because our livestock must be constantly fed as scheduled to avoid health and mortality challenges”*.

The Top Management allowed the researchers to meet with some of the current input suppliers in a round of personal interviews. These could be branded as actors under CATWOE because they are part of those who could take relevant actions to bring about positive change on the issue (see, [Checkland, 1981](#), [Checkland and Poulter, 2006](#); [Železnik et al., 2017](#)). A current maize and limestone supplier remarked; *“we encounter challenges in the process of delivery of these input materials and we do what we possibly can, to honour our supply agreement with the organisation, they have to pay more for any further demand for prompt deliveries!”*.

These input suppliers noted that there is a need for investment of resources via a bigger inventory warehouse by management which will enhance the smooth operation process. However, management response was negative, because of the cost and adverse effects of higher inventory cost.

The top Management staff were interviewed, being owners under CATWOE, who are the key decision-makers about the issues (see, [Checkland, 1981](#), [Checkland and Poulter, 2006](#); [Cox and Kirkham, 2018](#)). They explained that at some point, input suppliers were not

honest when it comes to delivery of these materials which led to discontinuing their contract of supply and embark on the direct acquirement of material from distance Northern Nigerian markets, where these input materials were sold.

The General Accountant explained, *“we cannot trust our suppliers any longer, and this worries our operations”*.

Other respondents to interviews, including Supervisors and Middle Managers from other sections of the farm such as Layers, Piggery, and Fishery. These respondents could be considered as customers to the Feed Mill, under CATWOE. They expressed their concerns about the challenging supply chain for the input materials to the Feed Mill. They recognized the Top Management decision to source for input materials directly from markets, in northern Nigeria. It was also discovered that these efforts could not solve the delay issues. *“We will continue to work hard to find a lasting solution to the input material supply challenges we face as an organisation”* (General Accountant).

Some Supervisors drawn from production section were interviewed on this issue. They are also customers under CATWOE because their departmental operations depend on the supply from the Feed Mill. They suggested that these input materials, such as maize which has highest percentage need in the farm, can be gotten from the host community farmers.

Approval was secured to have meetings with the host community farmers for a possible supply of the input materials. A workshop was conveyed. At the workshop session, which lasted for about one hour and forty-five minutes, the host community representatives of 16 individuals. These represent actors and environmental influence under CATWOE (see, [Checkland and Poulter, 2006](#); [Taylor et al., 2016](#)).

The participants of the workshop gave their backing to this development, explaining that input materials such as maize can be bought in higher quantities and be stored in the silo or the farm's warehouse, through the surplus periods and if appropriately stored would last up to two years. *“If we went that far to the north, it would amount to a disservice to the communities, and in the ultimate, it would end up as a good plan but in the wrong location, which can distract the current operation in the farm”* (Hatchery Manager). This same idea was taken to another workshop with the Top Management-who in this case could be seen as the owners under CATWOE, which can implement or stop any decision-making process (see, [Checkland, 1999](#); [Checkland and Poulter, 2006](#); [Soušek et al., 2017](#)).

During the session, they decided to the earlier thought to make provisions to these farmers at the initial stage, which will sustain the relationship with the host communities, they expressed the fear of not trusting these local farmers in terms of breaching an agreement.

In their conclusion, they agreed to buy these inputs required from local communities only if it is sold at the same price as that in the northern markets. This would lead to an increase in the quantity of required input for the operation of the Feed Mill in the near future.

## 5. Discussion

Effective leadership approach required to address operational challenge remained a continual task for the Top Management of the case study organisation. This affirms the claim of complexity researchers (e.g. [Mackinnon and Wearing, 1980](#); [Grint, 2005](#); [Vincent et al., 2018](#); [Simone et al., 2018](#)), who hold that they are far from finding equilibrium between identified problems and the stakeholders' interest. Systemic leadership intervention suggested in this research provided an approach to address the multiple issues, simultaneously continuously.

The use of methods such as the boundary setting provided a means to sort and partition non-linear issues to suit the interest of the stakeholders ([Ajayi, 2006](#)). It focused on the problem identified rather than the structure of the operations of the case study organisation. Most of the issues identified in the research work highlight the popularity of

leadership style (e.g. democratic and autocratic). While [Hu et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight the importance of a leader's relationship with organisation members in propagating leadership practice, set boundaries help in appreciating the effects of leadership effort in addressing identified issues of interest in an operational process. Nevertheless, the sustainability of set boundaries can be challenging due to emerging operational issues ([Midgley and Pinzón, 2011](#); [Ufua, 2019](#)).

Various workshop sessions organised were instrumental in gathering detail information and also provide a platform to expose the raw leadership practice in the case study organisation.

While it was observed that the practice of democratic and autocratic styles was used by leaders of the case study organisation, at various points across the research process, it was obviously found that switching of these leadership styles was applied at different points in the research process. For example, the leaders applied a complete autocratic decision when they shut down an investigation on aggressive leadership ([Imhonde et al., 2009](#); [Onukwufor, 2013](#)). At the same time, democratic leadership process was adopted in addressing the issues of permission to attend church services.

Furthermore, giving attention to the suggestion of the participants and setting balance with the organisational objectives provided a formidable platform for effective systemic Leadership practice. In similar research, [Maak et al. \(2016\)](#), identify the inherent complexity and unstable context surrounding the practice of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the Australian background. They call for an integrative responsible leadership style that can fix the challenge to effective CSR practices. This suggestion agrees with the finding from this research process which points out that complex organisational issues would require multiple leadership approaches to address.

The implementation of systemic leadership resulted in productive suggestions advanced by participants who were from various sections in the case study organisation. These were useful to leadership positioning and decisions that affect the organisation and the stakeholders. In contrast, instances of autocratic decisions were noticed, resulting in aggressive reactions and decisions to address complex issues. This observation contradicts the finding of [Shao et al. \(2017\)](#) who reckon that a learning culture can be achieved via productive relations between the leaders and members in an operational system. This is because the switch of leadership approach in this research process, especially to autocratic leadership style has not provided the platform for sustainable and effective learning, rather a dictatorial relationship (see, [Ngoasong et al., 2017](#); [Olokundun et al., 2019](#)). The argument in this research is that the adopted style of leadership determines to what extent members can achieve learning in an operational process. [Asrar-ul-Haq and Kuchinke \(2016\)](#), found out that the adopted leadership approach influences both the commitment and relationship between the leader and organisation members in the act of propagating leadership practice. Similarly, learning among members can be based on the extent to which the leaders are willing to offer support, and also the commitment of the members in an operational process (see, [Ufua et al., 2020](#)).

However, findings from this research process equally showed that the emerging complex issues largely determine the leadership framework adopted by the leaders, whether democratic or autocratic. This points out the fact that full and sustainable implementation of a particular leadership approach, whether democratic or autocratic is not a long-term possibility in addressing complex organisational issues (see, [Aronson, 2001](#); [Van Vugt et al., 2004](#); [McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2005](#); [Maria Stock et al., 2017](#); [Haggard and Kaufman, 2018](#)).

The current trend of research (e.g. [Hajri et al., 2017](#); [Hayes, 2018](#)), recognise the importance of changes in leadership practice, switching from one to the other (e.g. from autocratic to democratic). This was a common practice among leaders in this research process, on a platform of a systemic leadership intervention. Systemic leadership intervention embraces fragmented leadership thinking. It is predicated on the combination of ideas from different leadership styles in addressing complex issues at the same time, with the overriding interest in addressing

complex issues. It, therefore, combines feasible elements of different leadership styles to frame an effective leadership approach that suits the complex leadership issues at hand, based on the context and the interest of the stakeholders at each stage of the research process. This shares similarity with ([Anderson and Sun, 2017](#); [Bowers et al., 2017](#)), who emphasise reviewing existing leadership styles to acknowledge their overlaps and the creation of a new theory. Such leadership approach results to connected thinking and actions that strive to satisfy the interest of all stakeholders who are affected by leadership decisions (see, [Midgley, 2000](#); [Midgley and Ochoa-Arias, 2012](#); [Ufua et al., 2018](#); [Osabohien et al., 2020](#)).

The findings from the current research, therefore, suggest that the sustainability of leadership approach in addressing complex operational issues can be achieved through the skilful implementation of fragmented leadership thinking. It also provides a working platform for participation, where necessary, and compliance where orders are given based on the context and the interests of the participants. This clearly leaves the organisational leaders with the responsibility to engage and develop working and acceptable solutions that can address identified operational leadership issues ([Shao et al., 2017](#)). Nevertheless, this argument contrasts the submission of leadership researchers (e.g. [Zhu et al., 2015](#)), who suggest unitary leadership thinking that involves either leading on a given leader approach and observing ethical constraints. This is because observations in the current research show that operational leadership issues do not emerge in clearly defined forms that could with a unitary leadership approach. Instead, they tend to be complicated, requiring plural methods and techniques to address. It, therefore, affirms the fact that in addition to other factors (e.g. the leaders' worldviews and preferences). Therefore, the identified complexity at hand determines the leadership approach adopted on the platform of a systemic leadership intervention.

Systemic leadership intervention applied in this research adheres to the adaptation of chosen leadership styles, as suggested by situational leadership authors (e.g. [Blanchard et al., 1993](#); [Graeff, 1997](#); [Lynch et al., 2018](#)). Nevertheless, it takes the more in-depth option to incorporate the use of innovations and re-invention of leadership styles to set a creative approach via fragmented leadership thinking. Therefore, under the systemic leadership intervention, as witnessed in this research process, a supposed autocratic leader can exhibit democratic leadership attributes at some points in their operational process, based on the identified issues and the stakeholders' interest. It, therefore, connotes that flexibility of chosen leadership style(s) could provide a working solution to identified complexities ([Thite, 2000](#); [van Rossum et al., 2016](#); [Rothman, and Melwani, 2017](#)).

The adopted systemic leadership intervention in this research process acknowledges the importance of the context under which complex operational issues were addressed. This informed the framing of vital research platforms such as boundary setting, stakeholder involvement etc ([Midgley, 2000](#); [Yolles, 2001](#); [Davis et al., 2015](#); [Velez-Castiblanco et al., 2016](#); [Ufua et al., 2019](#)). It exposed both the leaders and participants in the case study organisation to effective operational process innovation, continuous improvement and adaptability of their leadership decision. It is tailored to suit the complexities identified, as well as equipping them with the resilience to face emerging changes due to uncontrollable complexities in their operational process.

The outcomes of systemic leadership intervention resulted in an all-inclusive approach, predicated on the meaningful engagement with the right stakeholders at each stage of the research process. However, in line with the findings of ([Midgley and Ochoa-Arias, 2012](#); [Velez-Castiblanco et al., 2016](#)), it was observed that sometimes the decision-making process became slow due to its democratic process and the use of various research tools such as the workshops and conduct of detailed interviews. This tended to be unsuitable in some critical situations which could require swift intervention, nevertheless, the possibility of applying ideas and techniques from various leadership styles, based on a fragmented leadership thinking, adequately cover this limitation (see, [Ufua et al., 2018](#)).

It provided the means to address the challenging effects of blunt leadership practices that lack the required flexibilities, as observed by [Schyns and Schilling \(2013\)](#). A systemic leadership intervention, in the context of this research, resulted in the avoidance of the destructive leadership practices that are linked to extreme autocratic style or unwanted delays that can be caused by democratic leadership.

Finally, following the thoughts of authors (e.g. [Huzynski and Buchanan, 2007](#); [Pelletier, 2012](#); [Hu et al., 2016](#); [Ibidunni et al., 2019](#)), who recognise the relevance of relationship building, systemic leadership intervention gave recognition to the expertise skills and worldviews of the leaders and participants in the entire research process. This became a source of strength to its implementation in the research process, encouraging participation and the development of useful insight, needed to address complexities that affected various stakeholders. It equally lent support to enforce compliance, especially in the areas of identification and selection of leadership options, in the development of approach/es to address complex situations, as noted in the case study organisation. This was effectively projected understanding across the operational structure of the case study organisation and its stakeholders.

## 6. Conclusion

This research paper applied systemic leadership intervention to addressing leadership complexities in the private sector, focusing on a case study of a commercial livestock farm. It highlights fragmented leadership thinking, which allows the selection and combination of different leadership styles, relevant to addressing complexities in an operational process. It recognised that the implementation of a particular leadership style could become a challenge in the long run. That is due to the nature of complex issues faced by leaders in an operational process. Key learning from this work is that emerging complexities largely determine the leadership approach to address them.

While this work could be a timely effort, it was observed that the implementation of systemic leadership intervention was sometimes slow in its process due to the requirement for meaningful engagement with the stakeholders. However, this was addressed by relying on the leaders' innovation and skilful decisions that reflect mutual understanding and stakeholders' interest in the case study firm.

### 6.1. Recommendations

The findings of this research could be adapted to other research contexts, being a qualitative work. Further research could consider exploring the subject of leadership and complexity in the light of quantitative approach. Researchers can also implement systemic leadership intervention in the public sector, as well as introduce more stakeholder groups' involvement. Such could go further to unravel learning in the areas of addressing oppressive leadership exertions and facilitate sustainable relationships that can lend further support to leadership practice.

Our use of CATWOE in the current research tends to possess 'gate keeper's feature, which could pose a significant challenge to free participation in its application, especially in the choice and involvement of participants. This is considered a potential limitation associated with the application CATWOE, as a rule, to identify affected stakeholders in this research process. It would, therefore, be suggested for further research on the application of CATWOE, to have a critical re-examination its bases. This is to ensure that its application does not include marginalisation in a research process ([Midgley, 2000](#)).

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Daniel E. Ufua: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

Oduwayo, P. Salau: Performed the experiments, Wrote the paper.

Ochei Ikpefan: Performed the experiments; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Joy, I. Dirisu: Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data.

Emmanuel, E. Okoh: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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### Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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