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Stakeholders Relationship Management: An Alignment with the Systems School of Management Thought

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Abstract: *The systems school of management thought has served in the development of theories which will continue to provide managers and students of organisations with metaphors, terminology and explanations about how organisations function. One of such theories, the stakeholders' theory, describes the systemic relationship and interaction between the organization and its stakeholders. This paper discusses the stakeholder's relationship management and its alignment with the systems school of management thought. The objectives of the paper comprise of describing the stakeholder, examine the concept of stakeholders' relationship management as a contemporary and emerging topic in management, and discussing literature which aligns stakeholders' relationship management to the systems school of management thought. In conclusion, the paper describes business organizations as open systems which must interact with and involve their stakeholders in order to be effective, thus rooting the stakeholders' relationship management concept in the systems school of management thought. It was therefore recommended that organizations strive to effectively identify, map and engage their stakeholders as a means of ensuring survival and continuity.*

Keywords: *Stakeholders relationship management, Systems theory, business environment, open systems*

INTRODUCTION

The word 'stakeholder' has assumed a prominent place in public and private management theory and practice as there appears to be a consensus on the validity of stakeholders theory as the most appropriate forum in which to address the question of whether ethics can co-exist with strategies in organizational performance (Clarkson, 1995). Freeman *et al.* (2010) and other scholars (Bryson, 2004; Donaldson &Preston, 1995) posit that stakeholder theory is used to challenge the notion that 'stockholders' are the only group to whom management needs to be responsive. This draws into the picture, the implications associated with neglecting or ignoring the significance of groups or environmental constituents which contribute towards and could impact on the affairs of the organization.

Barnard (1968) claims that stakeholder concept developed from aspects of business and management education which is embedded in the search for theories that allowed for certainty, prediction and behavioural control. Similarly, Freeman (1984) insists that stakeholder theory was formed to address three core business problems; how value is created and traded, connecting ethics and capitalism, and helping managers think about management. Clarkson

(1995) validates the adoption of a stakeholder approach to management as fundamental because it contributes to the long-term survival and success of an organization. The advancement of stakeholder theory in the management literature is further being justified in three interrelated but distinct approaches, which according to Donaldson and Preston (1995) serve to describe their relevance**:**

1. **Instrumental Approach**: Suggests that firms responsive to stakeholders will be more successful than those which are not (Maltby, 1997). That is to examine the connections between the practice of stakeholder's management and outcomes of various corporate goals. Recent research in Hart and Sharma (2004) reveals that this approach encourages firms to extend stakeholder engagement beyond primary groups critical to a firm's survival to the fringe groups as they assist the organization anticipate future sources of problems and emerging market.
2. **Descriptive Approach:** This approach to stakeholder theory examines the groups organizations identify as stakeholders and how the relationships are managed (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001)**.** The idea behind this approach is that stakeholder groups must be prioritized according to their power on organizations because it may not have all the resources to respond to every individual stakeholder demand (Madsen and Ulhoi, 2001). According to Mitchell *et al.* (1997) the analysis of stakeholder attributes suggests power, legitimacy and urgency, combined to determine the salience of a particular stakeholder group.
3. **Normative Approach**: This approach brings in ethical reasons why business should consult with stakeholders. It also identifies the philosophical or moral guidelines that are connected to the activities or the management of the organisation. Donaldson and Preston (1995) argues that organizations should engage with stakeholders based on underlying philosophical or moral principles.

Conversely, Weiss (1995) rejects the descriptive and instrumental usage of stakeholder theory, concluding that the normative approach had a weak foundation, therefore limiting its usefulness. Similarly, Thomas (1999) and Banerjee (2000) opined that organizations consider their interests in identifying and prioritizing stakeholders' demands. In all of this however, Freeman (2010) in his research explicitly regarded the stakeholder approach to be a strategic management tool which he insists as being instrumental as opposed to normative. From the foregoing there appears to be a lack of consensus on the position of stakeholders and their connection to the organization. One may argue that such incongruence on the issue exist due to the assessment of stakeholders' relationship from a rather narrow and isolated platform, void of its management theoretical underpinnings. There is therefore a need for identifying the significance of the content of stakeholders' relationship management to the wellbeing of the organization from a position that aligns it with its roots in the systems school of management thought. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to align stakeholders' relationship management within the ambits of the systems school of management thought, as a way of clarifying on its relevance to modern business organizations.

The following objectives are stated to guide the structure of this paper. The paper intends to accomplish as follows:

i. To describe the concept of stakeholders
ii. To examine the concept of stakeholders' relationship management
iii. To align stakeholders' relationship management with the systems school of management thought

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholders

Most authors in both communication and management literature follow the broad definition of stakeholders derived from Freeman (1984) who describes the term "stakeholder" as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of a firm's objectives Freeman (1984) and Bourne (2009). Similarly Archer (2003) describes it as any person or entity that is expected to either impact the project or be impacted by it. Whilst Freeman's definition is broad, there have been attempts to narrow and divide it into different groups. Clarkson (1995) categorizes them into voluntary and involuntary risk bearers in an organizational project. Whereas, Harris (2010) and Leung (2010) grouped them into internal and external stakeholders.

According to Harris (2010) and Leung (2010) the internal stakeholders are entities with legal contract to the project. These may include the shareholders, managerial employees and non-managerial employees. Shareholders are the owners of the organisation (investors). Managerial employees are those employees that are responsible for coordinating organisational resources and ensure that organisational goals are achieved. Whereas non-managerial employees are the workforce who have duties and responsibilities as outlined in a job description. Meanwhile they described the externals as entities with an interest in the project but without a contract. The people who are not the owners of the organisation, not employed by the organisation but can affect or been affected by the achievement of the organisation. They are the customers, suppliers, unions, host communities etc. The customers are responsible for selection of goods and services and money paid becomes their contributions to the organisation. The suppliers provide raw materials, component parts and other services to the organisation to reduce uncertainty in its technical or production operations for cost efficiencies. Government in other hands formulates policies/new regulation that may affect the organisation. Meanwhile, the relationship between the unions and the organisation can bring either conflict or corporation which has a direct effect on the productivity and effectiveness of the organisation. Host community has a stake in the outcomes of the organisation. Its general economic wellbeing and employment are affected by the achievement or the failure of the organisation.

Additionally, Leung (2010) argue that the externals consist of different sub-groups which he claims further strengthens the uncertainty of the definition as many clients irrespective of their category are termed stakeholders. On the other hand, Siering and Svensson (2012) argue that the category of a stakeholder will depend to a large extent on its proximity to, and activity in the project. Moreover, Clarkson (1995) classifies stakeholders into primary and secondary, where the primary stakeholders have a contractual tie to the organization and those who can affect or be affected by the organizations activities but may not influence the organization as secondary. Recognized as a central part of organizational effectiveness, stakeholders play important roles as advocates, sponsors, partners and agents of change.

Stakeholders Relationship Management

The underlying premise that consultation and dialogue with stakeholders will lead to better outcomes for all participants has been a subject of critical analysis states Collins *et al.* (2007), as a variety of authors have indicated that stakeholders can influence business in a more sustainable manner. This means that the capacity of an organization to generate sustainability over time is determined by its relationship with critical stakeholders. Freeman *et al.* (2010) supports the argument that organizations are increasingly dependent on their employees, suppliers and other stakeholders for existence therefore, cannot be self-contained.

Stakeholders make decisions based on their social responsibilities and economics; and are increasingly sensitive to the actions of organizations they have invested in (Freeman *et al.,* 2010). The management of stakeholders connotes institutions which are composed of an internal system of network existing within a framework of interrelated system of relationships with key internal (Direct) and external (Indirect) stakeholders**.** Most stakeholder management pundits agree that effective management of stakeholder relationship is crucial to resolving issues facing organizations, as they must continually take strategic decisions to effectively manage stakeholder interests. For emphasis, the stakeholder management allows for the effective management of the relationships with all stakeholders while serving their interests efficiently for sustained satisfaction. In corroboration, Harris (2010) opined that stakeholders are critical to the operations and subsequent performance of institutions.

Conversely, organisations do not operate alone but with multiple stakeholders in a world of relationships with the demands of globalization and complex scenarios given the emergence of global groups of stakeholders. Accordingly, suggestions have arisen for a redefinition of the complex relationship existing between institutions and stakeholders to guarantee that institutions adopt measures and policies that will promote the well-being of every stakeholder**.** Hitherto, organizations and business operate based on traditional beliefs that their primary responsibility is to the immediate stakeholders which are the investors (Freeman *et al*, 2010).

Among the broad array of literature that exists relating to the stakeholder process, Siering and Svensson (2012) highlights the practice where identification, classification, analysis and management of stakeholders are particularized. Bourne (2009) nevertheless has a different process which is more commercial, which is; identify, prioritize, visualize, engage and monitor. On the other hand, while stakeholder management processes are widely acknowledged, the optimal deployment of resources on stakeholder management activities is contested. Thus, Atkin and Skitmore (2008); Bourne and Walker (2006); Newcombe (2003) all agree that a fundamental feature in stakeholder relationship management is managing stakeholder expectations. Jepsen and Eskerod (2009) argue that the process of analysing the stakeholders while detecting these expectations is time consuming, however, Bourne (2009); Chinyio and Akintoye (2008) countered that the process was proper as stakeholder management data could be continuously updated in order to deal with expectations throughout the project life cycle. Bourne (2009) highlighted the foundation of effective stakeholder management as requiring the understanding of two factors; that a sustainable relationship provides some benefits to parties involved and that the tool to maintaining the relationship is communication.

Freeman *et al.,* (2010) and other advocates of stakeholder relationship management like Bourne (2009) suggests stakeholder analysis and engagement are approaches to be considered pertaining to relationship between business entities and groups or individuals. Further elucidating, the institute of internal auditors (2016) states that the suppliers relationship management (SRM) framework is a structured approach for identifying key stakeholders, documenting and implementing a plan for communication and periodic review of the plan in cases of significant restructure or change in the nature of the business or project. As a pre-requisite to stakeholder management, organizations must define their respective stakeholders and subsequently group them into two broad categories; influencers and stakeholders**.**

In agreement Donaldson & Preston (1995) opined that some stakeholders do not hold as much influence on the organization as others and therefore have no stake in the organization. Building on foregoing, Clarkson (1995) terms the relevant 'stakeholder' group as those 'without whose continuing participation, the corporation or project cannot survive as a going concern. Sautter and Leissen (1999) viewed organizations as often underestimating the complexity and importance of stakeholder identification; as the Institute of Internal Auditors (2016) simply puts it "not all stakeholders are equal, some have greater influence than others".

The Systems School of Management Thought

In the 1930's a biologist named Ludwig von Bertalanffy presented his systems theory to a philosophy seminar at the University of Chicago. Bertalanffy was a biologist who began the systems theory study in life sciences which eventually developed into the modern field of ecology. Bertalanffy believed that nothing could be understood by isolating merely one part of what plays a significant role in a system. His idea was that if a system was going to be examined or understood it had to be what he referred to as an open system (Bartol & Martin, 1991). An open system is one in which the system has both inputs and outputs. To demonstrate this example, we can look to the human body as an open system. In order for life to be sustained we must have oxygen, food and water to keep us alive. All of these components are what Bertalanffy labelled as inputs. However, he also explained that a system must have outputs or ways of excreting access waste or unused portions from the input. If our bodies were to never release air or excrete waste we would eventually self-implode because our body is not designed to simply keep receiving. An example of a closed system is one in which the system is self-sustaining and needs no input from outside sources which means there is nothing to put out.

Bertalanffy's idea laid the foundation for the systems school of management thought. As a theory, it was adopted in explaining the inter-dependence between the organization and its internal as well as external constituents. Its core argument is that nothing can be explained by isolating a component of total structure or system (Bechtold, 1997). As the systems theory began to develop, scholars from various disciplines began cultivating new theories with systems theory as their foundation. Theories involving individuals, relationships, families, organizations and groups all began to emerge with this basis of the systems theory. Systems theory became popular as a communication and relationship theory because it is believed that communication as well as relationships helps in defining and sustaining a system. Without good interactions and relationships, systems will fall out of homeostasis because the feedback loop or channel will fail to function properly.

Communication is the key to keeping an interpersonal system operating at its best. Systems theory plays an important role in communication because it helps develop strategies for effective communication, whether they are in individual, group or intercultural communication. In communication we are always communicating to those who are part of at least one system and we are always communicating as individuals who are part of at least one system. Once we realize our role in the system and how our decisions and actions affect the rest of these systems we are involved in, we can communicate more effectively. When someone becomes isolated in a system the means in which we can effectively communicate with them is drastically.

Systems Theory and Organizations

Systems theories, as opined by Jaja and Zeb-Obipi (1999) are those theories that consider an organisation as a system or as an interrelated and interdependent set of elements functioning as a whole, which are rooted in the natural and physical sciences aimed at connecting the concepts and techniques of other earlier theories into a unified theory. System theory according to them regards the organisation generally as a system with four basic factors; input, transformation process, outputs and feedback. Olum (2004) in his seminar paper presented at the 15th East African Central Banking Course, held on 12th July 2004, at Kenya School of Monetary Studies, describes inputs as resources such as raw materials, money, technologies and people; processes as planning, organising, motivating and controlling; outputs according to him are the products or services; whereas the outcomes/feedback as those factors that enhances quality of life or productivity for customers or clients and productivity.

Flood and Jackson (1991) viewed system as a complex and highly interlinked network of parts exhibiting synergistic properties the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a collection of interrelated parts acting together to achieve some goal which exists in the environment. Also, system is defined as a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes related to each other and to the environment so as to create or form a whole (Schoderbek *et al*, 1985). Further, Checkland (1981) suggests that a system as a model of a whole entity, which may be applied to human activity. With respect to management, system simply refers to a set of different independent parts working together in interrelated manner to

accomplish a whole. Cornell and Jude (2015) opined that systems theory focuses on the relations between the parts, rather than reducing an entity such as the human body into its parts or elements (e.g. organs or cells), systems theory focuses on the arrangement of and relations between the parts and how they work together as a whole. The way the parts are organized and how they interact with each other, determines the properties of that system.
Meanwhile, organisations are regularly described in systems terminology. Such descriptions have become an important aspect of explaining the nature of organisations and how they function. As well, these descriptions provide a common language for discussing issues relating to how to manage them more effectively. Robbins and Barnwell (1998) point out that describing organisations as systems provides insights into their make-up. For example, Harvey and Brown (1992) use systems terminology to describe a dynamic model of organisational change. Systems theory is an abstract model for better understanding the nature of the world (Bechtold, 1997).

Organisations are comprised of a set of interdependent parts, or sub-systems, that interact with each other to form a unified whole that gives the organisation its unique identity. The organisation is seen as being capable of making changes to these sub-systems, although it is recognised that this is not a simple process. From the presence of these interdependent parts, the organisation develops configuration and structure. The sub-systems can form into a hierarchy of systems. For example, organisations are made up of individuals at the micro level. Individuals work within the context of groups at another level. The organisation is also seen as a sub-system of a larger macro system, which may be identified as a larger organisation, industry, society or economic zone.

Business organisations are normally described as open systems. While organisations gain their identity from the boundaries that differentiate them from their context, their alliances and their competitors, organisational boundaries are permeable. Organisations are living systems based on networks of stakeholders bound together for a range of reasons. Such networks develop on the basis of the interactions that occur within the defining boundaries. But more importantly, the networks that represent the organisation prosper on the quality of the interactions that occur across the boundaries. Closed systems, such as clocks, have their boundaries clearly defined and are internally self-sustaining and self-regulating until the internal energy supply runs out. In the case of the clock, unless somebody intervenes and rewinds the spring, it stops indefinitely. As open systems, business organisations are capable of negative entropy. Entropy refers to the natural capacity for a system to fall into decline and decay over time. It can indicate the relative degree of disorganisation or disorder in the system or the potential for it. Negative entropy is the ability of open systems to bring in new energy in the form of inputs and feedback from the environment in order to delay or arrest entropy, the decaying process (Bartol & Martin, 1991).

An important aspect of organisations as transforming systems is achieving a state of equilibrium which is a state of balance between opposing forces or actions. Equilibrium represents a state of adjustment between opposing or divergent influences or elements, or homeostasis. It can also be the normal state of existence of a system in its environment (Smith, 1982). If an organisation is not changing it is not because it is in a state of equilibrium, but because it is not responding to changes in the environment (Smither *et al,* 1996). This view points out the constancy of change. However, the dynamic equilibrium model is fundamental to general systems theory. Dynamic equilibrium is a state of balance between various forces in opposition to each other. While the emphasis is on reaching a state of equilibrium, there is an ongoing dynamic between the forces for change and the forces opposing change.

Stakeholders Relationship Management: An Alignment with the Systems Theory

The studies about stakeholders can be presented according to several approaches. The basic difference of them all is the degree of importance given to organizations. One can notice two lines of thought based on different logics. Atkinson *et al.* (1997) and Shankam, (1999) define the importance of stakeholders according to the degree of their contribution to the organizational performance. Bremmers *et al.* (2004) define a group of stakeholders as a group of environmental organisms which influence or are influenced by the objectives and operational processes of the organization. The authors correctly noted that as long as there is not much disagreement about who can potentially be a stakeholder (people, groups, neighbourhoods, organizations, institutions, societies and even the natural environment), the definitions about what a stakeholder is vary from the widest possible to the most restrict, having effective implications on the company's capacity of recognizing the public to which it should report.

According to Vinha (2003) a business must collaborate with those responsible for governmental regulations and the strategy must not be at first restricted to the firm, but instead must divulgated and perfected along with the interested stakeholders. Therefore, the information and transparency of the adopted practices would function as an answer to the external stakeholder's pressure, which therefore begins to contribute in the management process. To implement voluntary codes of conduct and submit to processes of external auditorship and certification would reinforce the company's commitment with transparency and openness. Integrating external stakeholders (environmentalists, community leaders and the media and regulation organs) in the decision-making processes about the design and product development allows the company to accumulate socially complex resources involving fluidness of communication between the departments, communication which goes beyond the borders of the organization. The biggest benefit of this triumph is the possibility of anticipation in relation to competitors who did not build the specific competence to manage social actives and engage their stakeholders in external processes.

The union of business and stakeholders generates a systemic and multidisciplinary integration which serves to model the company towards developing criteria of sustainable development and to therefore form strategic alliances. There is a vast field which contains a superior dynamism of the company in influencing stakeholders or being influenced by them. The notion of interrelationships refers to the types and forms of connections between elements or individuals as well as between these elements/individuals and the whole. The notion of system refers to the complex unit of the inter-related whole and to its phenomenic characters and properties. The notion of organization refers to the disposal of the parts in one and in the whole.

Morin (1987) explains that events occurring in the organization are emerging as a way to revert a chaotic situation in regards to its relationships. The systemic view of organizations captures what emerges from people (stakeholders) throughout the events and tries to reorganize the organization. This systematic capturing, transforming, producing and connecting, maintains and guarantees the continuity of the organization at the same time that it translates Morin's (1987) trinary concept (interrelations – organizations - systems). In the perspectives of open systems, the limit between the organizations and their environments can be considered permeable because the organizations cannot separate themselves easily from the environments in which they are inserted. Egri and Pinfield (1998) affirm that the organizations adapt to their environments in two different ways: at first, within the limited perspective of a rational mechanic model, the organizations change when their own limited interests are considered; secondly, by an institutional point of view, the organizations subject themselves to the changing social values by incorporating these values in the decision-making premises of the members of the organization's dominant coalition. And also, the individuals (stakeholders) change the collective concepts of organizations in their environments, either through their own interests or through the cultivation of an ecological consciousness. Through a systemic focus, Egri and Pinfield (1998) consider the organizations as dynamic phenomena which are constantly adjusting to environmental influence.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the concept of stakeholders' relationship management. Its' major contribution is linking or aligning the concept of stakeholders' relationship management to the systems school of management thought as a way of enhancing clarity on the concept. The reflections about the theories examined in this study demonstrate that the base of the organization should be designed following systemic principles and at the same time it should systemically capture the stakeholder's objectives to guarantee the survival of the business. The paper identifies stakeholders are not just constituents of the environment of the organization, but as forming a fundamental network of relationships and units that define the functionality and success of the organization. On this basis, the paper concludes that stakeholders, from the viewpoint of the systems school of management thought are integral to the wellbeing and survival of the business organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the conclusions reached, this paper recommends as follows:

i. That organizations actively seek out and engage significant parties and groups that could influence or be influenced by their businesses and operations within any social or environmental context.

ii. That organizations strive to identify and map stakeholders based on their levels of power and influence over the activities and functionality of the business.
iii. That organizations invest in their relationships with the relevant parties, partners and customers and host communities as a way of sustaining operations, gaining competitive advantage and ensuring superior as well as quality performance.

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