

Labor Union Leadership And Career Advancement In Major Nigerian Oil Companies

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ABSTRACT

Labor related issues in the upstream sector of the Nigerian oil industry started to emerge soon after the discovery of petroleum in commercial quantities within the Niger Delta area mid- 1950's (Shell, 2000). Different groups within and outside the oil industry formed opinions about union leaders in the most strategic industry in the country. This was in part the case because the work force became better educated than their predecessors. One group among the industry's stakeholders believe labor union leaders have been ill treated, penalized, and stagnated, over the years by their managements. Supervisors and managers, it is alleged, act repulsively and harassingly towards union leaders in order to suppress their activities. Others believe the union leaders have been pampered and favorably treated by the managements of these companies in order to maintain peace. This study sets out to discover whether or not these notions about labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria are true. In this regard, ten null hypotheses were tested to accept or reject the notion that union leaders are not favored, are not educationally qualified, are not productive, are not militant, are not loyal, are not penalized for holding labor union leadership positions, cannot progress beyond executive status and cannot score more than 70 percentile on the researcher's charismatic and superior leadership scale. One of the hypotheses was tested using ANOVA, two were tested using Kruskal-Wallis, and seven were tested using Chi-Square. The research findings highlighted some areas that the management of major oil companies and the federal government of Nigeria need to look into. Management of these companies need to look into the issue of the small group of managers and supervisors in the companies who still view labor unionism in negative light and consider labor union leaders as mere loafers and trouble makers. Training programs in labor unionism need to be carried out on regular basis for union leaders, managers, and supervisors in these companies. Further, the federal government of Nigeria needs to look into the perennial labor-related conflicts between the major oil companies and their host communities.

Keywords: Nigerian Oil industry; Labor Union Leadership; Labor Relations

INTRODUCTION

The labor intensive nature of petroleum exploration and production activities soon resulted in different labor-related issues after the discovery of petroleum in commercial quantities by Shell, in the mid-1950's (Shell, 2000). According to Akinlaja (1999), active unionization began in the upstream sector of the Nigerian oil industry in the late 1950's just as it had been in the downstream sector of the industry and several other sectors of the Nigerian economy, many years earlier. This was just a few years from the time Shell-BP, the Anglo-Dutch company, drilled their first development well at Oloibiri, in January 1956 (Shell, 2000). In 1977, the Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) emerged as an umbrella body and a new name for all unions representing the interest of junior staff employees in both the upstream and the downstream of the Nigerian oil industry. In a similar vein, the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) emerged, as an umbrella body, and a new name for all unions representing the interest of senior staff employees in both the upstream and the downstream sectors of the Nigerian oil industry (Akinlaja, 1999).

As posited by Nwachukwu (2000), employees join unions mainly to be able to bargain collectively. Leaders therefore emerged to represent the unions in the collective bargaining efforts, among other things. It is of note however, that although the concepts of collective bargaining were adopted sporadic uprisings between the unions and their managements, or the government, became common within the industry. Ranging from national strike actions called by their national executives, to protest, work-to-rules, and outright strike actions by house unions, the industry began to attract societal attention as never before. This was more so the case as the Nigerian economy gradually drifted into a mono-product level (Aminu, 2000).

Different perception about labor union leaders in the oil industry therefore began to emerge within and outside the industry. Like the experience of their predecessors, some of these were manifested in such derogatory names as “trouble makers”, “rabble-rousers”, “chisellers”, and others, given to union leaders. Different groups within and outside the oil industry formed their opinions about these union leaders in the most strategic industry in the country. This was more so the case as the work force became better educated than their predecessors. Workers appeared to know their rights and were constantly demanding them (Nwachukwu, 2000). One group among the industry’s stakeholders believe the labor union leaders have been ill treated, penalized, and stagnated, over the years, by their managements. Supervisors and managers, it is alleged, act repulsively and harassingly towards union leaders in order to suppress their activities. A second group of stakeholders however believes the union leaders have been “bought over” by their managements through promotions, periodic local and foreign trips, and special treatments, in order to lessen their pressure on management and hence maintain industrial “peace” within the companies.

This study sets out to discover whether or not these notions about labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria are true. Are union leaders actually penalized in the companies because of their labor union activities? Are they treated different from other employees? Do they have equal opportunities for advancement as their colleagues who do not hold labor union leadership positions? Are union leaders productive enough for career advancement? Are they favored as a result of their visibility and management’s desire to maintain peace?

Finally, the study examined how far, by way of advancement, the typical Labor union leader in the major oil companies in Nigeria would have gone in his or her career, by the time he or she reaches retirement age of 60 years. In this study, the focus is on leaders of house unions, that is, union leaders who are themselves employed in some other functions within the oil companies. Their union leadership roles are therefore voluntary additional responsibilities to their normal official functions within those companies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bass (1990) posited that leadership has been regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions. No wonder, according to him, there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept. Holloman (1968, 1987) as cited in Pierce, J.L. and Newstrom, J.W. (2000), for example, attempted to distinguish between leadership and headship which is based on inheritance, usurpation and appointment, by conceiving headship as being imposed and leadership as being accorded. Yalokwu (1999) however asserted that the emphasis of leadership is on interpersonal behavior in a broader context and is often associated with the willing and enthusiastic behavior of followers. According him, a leader often has sufficient influence to bring about longer-term changes in people’s attitudes and to make changes more acceptable. A labor union leader is therefore specifically a leader of a group of employees who have come together to negotiate the terms and conditions of their working lives collectively rather than individually. Union leaders deal with employers on the workers’ collective behalf (Schermerhon, 2002).

In this connection the term “career” has been defined in many ways in the literature. Schermerhon (2002) for example, defined a career as a sequence of jobs and work pursuits that constitutes what a person does for a living. He defined a career path as a sequence of jobs held over time during a career. Zunker (2002), however, defined a career as the activities and positions involved in vocations, occupations, and jobs as well as to related activities associated with an individual’s lifetime of work. According to Brown (2001), a career includes the job and series of jobs that a person has until retirement. In the works of Mount (1984) as cited in Baridam (2001), an individual’s career develops in three main stages: the establishment stage where individuals attempt to build skills

and develop competencies to make an occupational choice; the advancement stage where people have chosen an occupation and have made serious attempts to reach some goals; and the maintenance stage where an individual is well settled in a life- style and career pattern. An individual in the maintenance stage has made a mark in the chosen career and will only strive to maintain his or her position in the organization by doing the same job very well. For career advancement in an organization, Brown (2001) highlighted the importance of adequate preparation, the ability to accept supervision, and knowing how to get along with people. According to Nwachukwu (2000), an employee cannot rise from the bottom to the top without a high degree of commitment to self-development irrespective of company’s policy to promote from within. He asserts that employees are not promoted for doing what is expected of them, but rather for performing above the average expectation.

Schanbroeck and Lam (2002) claimed that quantitative evidence suggests that having a social and educational background that is shared with decision-makers predicts advancement in organizations. According to Mehra, Kilduff and Brass (2001), within each specific work context, some individuals occupy more advantageous positions in social network than other individuals. These positions allow access to people who are otherwise disconnected to each other. The individuals (e.g. labor union leaders) act as go-betweens, bridging the “structural holes” between disconnected others, hence facilitating resource flows and knowledge sharing across the organization. Their contribution to organization functioning may lead to enhanced rewards, including faster promotions and higher performance ratings.

Seihert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) identified the importance of networking as a factor contributing to progress in one’s career. Indeed, Luthans, Hodgetts, and Rosenkrantz (1998) found that the most successful managers in their study spent 70 percent more time engaged in networking activities and 10 percent more time engaged in routine communication activities than their less successful counterparts. It is noted that credentials (education) and technical knowledge and skills gain entry into lower management but networks and subjective social factors gain advancement to higher levels (Adler and Israeli, 1994; Ibarra and Smith-Louvin, 1997; Powell, 1999). By and large, the work of the average labor union leader involves a lot of intra and inter-organization networking, structural positioning, and a lot of bridge building. These functions, among others, cannot but impact the union leader’s career. This assertion is, as earlier shown, supported by the literature.

METHOD

Cross-sectional quasi-experimental design was used for the study. It was a field study involving cross-sectional survey (Baridan, 2000). A combination of judgmental, convenience, and quota sampling was used. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the population under study, the Taro Yamen’s formula ($n = N / 1 + N (e) ^2$ where n = sample size, e = level of significance, and N = population size) was used to determine sample size. Therefore, at 0.05 level of significance, with $N = 8,250$ and $e = 0.05$, the sample size, $n = 382$. The sample was obtained judgmentally from the seven (7) major oil companies in Nigeria by using the ratio of their employee sizes and their relative crude oil production. The ratio therefore came to 10:6:5:4:4:3:1 for Shell: Mobil: Chevron: TotalFinaElf: Agip: Texaco: Conoco. Samples drawn from each of these companies in the accessible population were therefore: Shell (116), Mobil (70), Chevron (58), TotalFinaElf (46), Agip (45), Texaco (35), and Conoco (12). The data gathering instrument, a questionnaire, consisted of 40 questions, and was distributed to scientifically generated employees of the companies, as applicable, in Lagos, Warri, Port Harcourt, Bonny, and Eket.

Table 1: Respondents’ Spread in the 382 Copies of the Returned Questionnaire

Variable	Number	Percentage (%)
Union Leaders	102	27
Union Non-Leaders	197	51
Non-Union Members	83	22

Source: Sonaike, K.O. (2003), Research Report

This is a close estimate of the real life situation as approximately 80 percent of the employees in the population under study are labor union members. About one third of these are either currently union leaders or have been union leaders in the past.

Table 2: Gender and Union Affiliation of Respondents

Variable	Union Leaders (%)	Union Non-Leaders (%)	Non-Union Members (%)	Total (%)
Male	21	27	12	60
Female	6	24	10	40
PENGASSAN	19	31	-	50
NUPENG	8	20	-	28
Non-Union Members	-	-	22	22

Source: Sonaike, K.O. (2003), Research Report

Table 1 illustrates that 60 percent of the respondents were males while 40 percent were females. 50 percent were members of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), 28 percent were members of the Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Employees (NUPENG), while the remaining 22 percent are non-labor union members.

Face validity and sampling validity were used to check for validity (Baridam, 2001) while the split half reliability procedure was used to check for reliability (Baridam, 2001; Cascio, 1991; Biemer and Trewin, 1997; Nichols, Baker and Martin, 1997). The dependent and the independent variables were measured by specific question in the measuring instrument, and where appropriate, in the researcher's Labor Union Leadership Career Advancement Model. Ten (10) null hypotheses were tested in the study. Two (2) of the ten (10) null hypotheses were tested using the Kruskal-Wallis Rank Test, one (1) was tested by ANOVA, while seven (7) were tested using Chi-Square (Churchill, Jr., 1998; John Best and James Jahn, 1998; Baridam, 2001).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Ten null hypotheses were tested to accept or reject the notion that union leaders are not favored, are not educationally qualified, are not productive, are not militant, are not loyal, are not penalized for holding labor union leadership positions, cannot progress beyond executive status, and cannot score more than 70 percentile on the researcher's charismatic and superior leadership characteristics scale. One hypothesis was tested using ANOVA, two were tested using Kruskal-Wallis, while seven were tested using Chi-Square. The hypotheses were tested at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance.

Four of the hypotheses were accepted at 0.05 level of significance while six were rejected at 0.05 level of significance. On the other hand, six of the hypotheses were accepted at 0.01 level of significance while four were rejected at 0.01 level of significance. The results showed that Labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria are productive, possess necessary educational qualifications, are loyal to company, are not treated different from other employees, and can progress to executive status. However, they rarely make it to senior executive levels.

To a large extent, union leaders enjoy management's support and acceptance, but minor degrees of subtle resistance from some management-level employees, do exist. Career advancement of union leaders is enhanced, to some extent, by their visibility and managements' general desire to maintain peace within the companies. Although union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria are generally not militant, there are periodic conflicts and industrial actions possibly masterminded by the influence of the few autocratic and militant ones among them.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria will generally not score more than 70 percentile on the Charismatic and Superior Leaders' Characteristics Scale of the researcher's Labor Union Leadership Career Advancement Model, and hence will not advance in their careers beyond the corresponding level on the salary spread scale. This result limits, to some extent, the growth of union leaders to executive cadre (the fourth quintile in Table 3).

Table 3: Hypothetical Salary Progression in the Major Oil Companies in Nigeria

Salary Spread Range	Quintile	Hypothetical Title
21+	Fifth	Senior Executive
16 - 20	Fourth	Executive
11 - 15	Third	Senior Staff
6 - 10	Second	Intermediate Staff
1 - 5	First	Junior Staff

Source: Sonaike, K.O. (2003), Research Report

These results should not be surprising, as normally, from the experience of the researchers spanning more than 28 years in one of these major oil companies, only a very small percentage of the entire workforce ever gets to the fifth quintile (senior executive) during the course of their career. Anyone in the fourth quintile can therefore be viewed as a success story in the industry. It is really heart-warming to know that labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria possess the potentials and can rise to executive status in the companies. This finding buttresses the position of Schermerhon (2002) that the adversarial model of trade unionism is now giving way to a new and more progressive era of greater co-operation. Each side now seems more willing to understand and adjust to the new and challenging times.

Labor union leaders in the major companies in Nigeria enjoy management’s support and acceptance. It is only in very rare cases that union leaders experience some resistance from some management representatives (e.g. some managers and supervisors). This finding is in sharp contrast to the positions of Koontz et al (1938) that “whatever the cause of effective unionism may be, these organizations often create difficult leadership problems for the effective enterprise managers.” Koontz et al (1983) view union leaders as rivals of an organization’s leadership.

They see the union leaders with the powers they wield among the work force, as threats to management. The research findings have, however, countered that position, at least, for the major oil companies in Nigeria. Definitely, it will be difficult for any management to give equal opportunity for advancement to any group of employees who are not committed to company’s goal and aspirations but are mere rivals to the organization’s leadership and authority. Such a management will most likely look for the best and earliest opportunity to get rid of such a group (Fajana, 2000). This is not the case in the oil companies in Nigeria. Labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria are given the freedom, by their managements, to carry out their labor union functions unimpeded. This is truly a welcome development that fully supports Nwachukwu’s (2002) position that current labor union leaders are more educated and less distracted than their predecessors.

Further, labor union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria possess necessary educational qualifications, are productive, are not treated different from other employees, are neither favored nor penalized for taking on union leadership positions, and do not necessarily advance more in their careers due to their visibility and management’s desire to maintain peace. These being so, the question may then be asked: Why do labor union leaders take up the positions if there is really nothing in the positions for them? Without doubt, there are “things” in those offices for the union leaders, and the research findings are not at variance with the literature on needs theories (Iheriohanma, 2000). An example is David McClelland’s theory of needs which focuses on three needs: achievement (nAch), power (nPow), and affiliation (nAff) (George and Jones, 1996). Most trade union leaders’ profiles are more in line with the second class identified by McClelland; they are individuals with high power needs (nPow). By being in trade union leadership positions whereby they can wield a lot of influence among the workforce, call out the workforce for meetings, protects, etc, at will, and have access to senior management, their strong power needs are being satisfied. That, in many cases, is all that is in it for many trade union leaders and it is sufficient to motivate them in their union activities. Abraham Maslow (1943) proposed that human beings have five universal needs that they seek to satisfy: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. According to him, these needs can be arranged in a hierarchy of importance with the most basic or compelling needs - physiological and safety needs, at the bottom, and self actualization, at the very top.

An important lesson from Maslow (1943) is that workers differ in the needs they try to satisfy at work and what motivates one worker may not necessarily motivate another. When applied to the research findings, therefore, one can see that union leaders are at particular levels on the needs hierarchy whereby their need is satisfied by taking

on trade union leadership positions. This is most likely their belongingness needs. People at this stage want to be seen as strong members of the group. They will want to socialize, to partake in rallies, to be heard, and to help others generally. Union leadership provides for all these. It is possible, however, to have union leaders who are still very much at the lower levels of the hierarchy and are solely in union office mainly to satisfy their esteem needs. Such people want recognition; they want to have a sense of achievement, of accomplishment, among their colleagues. Whatever the case is, a union leader is in the position to satisfy a need. It is true that many are concerned about workers' plight and truly want a change for the better, but it is equally true that as they go about achieving these goals, they are equally meeting their own personal needs. There is nothing bad in all these; it is simply natural.

Experience has shown that many trade union leaders in the oil companies hold the offices mainly to prepare them for future political ambitions being nursed. Many see the union office as a good avenue to learn the "tricks of the game" (Selznick, 1957; Kakabadse and Korac- Kakabadse, 1996). Also, it is seen by many as an avenue to increase their popularity (Tharenon et al, 1994) and hence their chances in the future to contest and win local, state, or national elections. This is in line with the view of Mehra, Kilduff and Bass (2001) and those of Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001) on networking in organizations. This is particularly true in the major oil companies in Nigeria because of the strategic nature of the industry and the high employees' remuneration. Employees in the major oil companies normally already have what it takes to be known in their villages and towns. Many are traditional leader and many have investments that have been "nursed" over the years. They have the wherewithal to campaign for and win elections. Examples abound of such categories of former union leaders in the major oil companies in Nigeria who are currently local government Chairmen, legislators, senators, and even governors, in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings have presented some areas that the managements of major oil companies, and even the federal government of Nigeria, need to look into. The managements of these companies need to look into the issue of the small group of managers and supervisors in the companies who still view labor unionism in negative light and consider labor union leaders as mere loafers and trouble makers. Such category of employees subtly resists the activities of union leaders and tries their best to frustrate any of the union leaders working directly for them. This is very bad and is a result of half-baked knowledge of why labor unions exist in the first place. Re-orientation is necessary for such group of managers and supervisors.

Arrangements should be made to run regular in-house courses for managers and supervisors in the oil companies on the essentials of labor unionism and labor union leadership. Such training programs will help clarify roles on both sides – managers and labor union leaders. From the history of the different conflicts that had been experienced in the industry, it is clear that role re-clarifications would result in better management versus labor union relationships within the companies.

Finally, the federal government of Nigeria, being the major partner in the joint venture agreements with these companies, need to do something urgently to permanently solve the problem of intermittent hostilities on these companies by their host companies. By and large, such situations end up having industrial relations implications on the companies. The study has shown that, to a large extent, these conditions are caused by acute unemployment of the youths in these communities. The youths therefore turn their frustration on the companies, which happen to be their "next door" neighbors. As far as the youths are concerned, the companies represent the federal government. Just as labor union leaders organize strikes and lockdowns to secure attention when communication to resolve conflicts breakdown, community youths also resolve to crisis to secure attention. A determined long-term solution by the government is essential. Establishment of cottage industries has been touted in many quarters as a viable option.

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