

# **Investigating the Application of Strengths-Based Leadership in African Oil and Gas Industry: An Empirical Study**

**Chinedu Ogwus**

St. Thomas University, Miami, USA

## **Abstract**

This paper focused on understanding the extent to which leaders in oil and gas industry comply with the core principles of strengths-based leadership in managing their relationships with employees. The study relies on data collected from a total of 43 persons drawn from two oil and gas companies in Africa. All participants were selected using the purposive sampling method and occupied different positions within their respective organizations. Findings of the study revealed that a good number of practices among leaders in African oil and gas industry align with the core principles of the strengths-based leadership model. These were noted to include establishing positive work environments, effective communication which engenders trust and a perception of support was seen as a vital tool for preventing conflict within the workplace environment, developing the capacity of subordinates, and leaders who focus on their strengths and that of his or her subordinates tend to outperform leaders who place so much emphasis on the weaknesses of subordinates. However, the failure or unwillingness to coach and mentor subordinates is identified as a core attribute of the strengths-based model which requires further development in the African oil and gas industry. The study highlights the need for further investigations utilizing larger number of participants in order to aid generalization.

**Keywords:** Development; capacity; mentoring; managing, and Leadership

## **1. Introduction**

The oil and gas industry is one of Africa's most sensitive sectors, and this is in view of the reliance on the export of petroleum products for most of its government revenue. It is estimated that the industry accounts for about 95 percent of some countries foreign exchange earnings and 80 percent of annual revenue (Utulu et al., 2017). As such, the oil and gas industry is critical to oil export dependent economy, reasons for which there is need for managers and leaders of the industry to adopt appropriate leadership styles in order to ensure optimal performance and attainment of organizational objectives. In this regard, the strengths-based leadership model is proposed as a useful leadership style for organizations within the oil and gas sector to manage their relationships with employees.

The strengths-based theory of leadership essentially focuses on combining and amplifying strengths. The model is anchored on the argument that people perform best when working in their areas of strengths, and that performing teams are often composed of balanced and complementary set of strengths (Cooperrider & McQuaid, 2012). As such, leaders adopting the strengths-based model focus on creating work environments that pay close attention to the

strengths and weaknesses of subordinates (Ding & Yu, 2020). According to Kaiser & Overfield (2011), this enables leaders to avoid placing themselves or their subordinates in roles that demand strengths or talents they do not possess.

The model maintains that identifying and capitalizing on the strengths of others is the most effective way to achieve success (Bakker et al., 2019). It suggests that by intentionally assigning subordinates to positions according to their talents and strengths, the strengths-based leader builds an effective team where everyone is inspired and empowered to perform at their best. As suggested by Cooperrider & McQuaid (2012), understanding the strengths and weaknesses of subordinates allows leaders to assign tasks that present subordinates with opportunities for further development. As such, the strengths-based model promotes learning, openness to growth as well as positive change.

According to Lee et al (2014), the SBL model shifts emphasis from negative to positive aspects of organizational development, leveraging on what is working well. Key-Roberts & Budreau (2012) notes that by leveraging on what is working well, the SBL model informs the development of short- and long-term goals for enhancing the capacity of subordinates as junior leaders. Some of the core principles of strengths-based leadership as developed by Gottlieb et al. (2012) include: Recognizing the uniqueness of individuals; establishing positive work workplace environments; promoting learning; and developing effective teams.

One major criticism against the strengths-based approach is that it tends to ignore weaknesses and challenges (Whitney et al., 2010). However, it is pertinent to note that rather than ignoring the existence of weaknesses, strength-based leadership focuses on identifying, acknowledging and reframing weaknesses as opportunities for growth and innovation. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that strengths-based leadership is a perfect and flawless paradigm, as a few criticisms have been advanced by researchers and analysts.

Notably, the tendency for leaders to overuse their strengths has been raised by Kaiser & Overfield (2010). The researchers argued that based on the assumptions of the strengths-based approach to leadership, it is likely that while focusing on their strengths, leaders will eventually neglect other relevant behaviours that may benefit themselves, the team or organization. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that leaders who focus on their strengths and that of his or her subordinates tend to outperform leaders who place so much emphasis on the weaknesses of subordinates (Kaiser et al., 2007).

### **1.1 Aim**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which leaders in Nigeria's oil and gas industry adhere to the core principles of strengths-based leadership in managing their relationships with employees.

### **1.2 Methodology**

This study will rely on the grounded theory approach for data analysis. The approach was developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and has since evolved into a well-known methodology for carrying out scientific investigations, especially within social and behavioural sciences (Chun Tie et al, 2019). Rather than seeking to test a priori hypotheses, grounded theory focuses on constructing new theory and hypotheses based on inductive reasoning (Conlon et al., 2020).

Therefore, while sticking to the principles of grounded theory, the qualitative research approach was adopted for this study, with focus on interpretive phenomenological analysis. A total of 43 persons were recruited from two oil and gas firms in Lagos, Nigeria and Libreville, Gabon. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling method, and they included managers and employees. The first set of participants recruited for the study were known to the researcher. Using the snowball sampling technique, these early recruits recommended other participants for the study. Among the 43 participants for the study, a total of 11 managers, 13 senior cadre staff and 19 junior cadre employees were recruited (See Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of Study Participants

Characteristics of Study Participants		
Category	Variable	Frequency
Gender	Male	29
	Female	14
Age	20-30	20
	31-40	9
	41-60	14
Educational Level	Secondary School Certificate	19
	Degree/Diploma	17
	Post-graduate	7
Position	Lower	19
	Middle	13
	Top	11
Years of Experience	0-5	16
	6-10	8
	11 and Above	19

All participants were lectured on the meaning of strengths-based leadership, and this was to ensure that they understood the interview questions. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted as method of data collection. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. Though questions were predetermined, the researcher asked follow-up questions in line with the responses provided by the participants. This is in line with the recommendations of Rosenthal (2016) who highlighted the usefulness of follow-up questions for eliciting the views, opinions, and perspectives of respondents. Each interview was recorded using an audio recording device, while the researcher's observations and thoughts were recorded in a notebook. This was necessary to reduce interruptions during interviews, and to ensure that the views of the respondents were adequately captured (Rutakumwa et al, 2020).

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher while labels were assigned to aspects of the interview texts which held separate meanings. This is known as coding and was especially useful for identifying differences and similarities in the responses provided by participants to the interview questions. Coding was in line with the two research questions guiding the study, and are as follows:

1. To what extent do managers and leaders in African oil and gas industry apply the principles of strengths-based leadership to their relationship with subordinates?
2. What aspects of strengths-based leadership require further development among leaders and managers in the African oil and gas industry?

## 2. Results

Analysis of data obtained from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews returned a total of 31 themes, all of which were related to the specific behaviours exhibited by leaders in the continent's oil and gas industry towards developing the strengths of their subordinates. The identified themes were divided into two main categories which include: Establishing a positive work environment; and developing the capabilities of subordinates (See Table 2).

Table 2: Categories of identified themes

Category	Number of related themes
Establishing a positive work environment	19
Identifying and developing the capabilities of subordinates	12

### 2.1 Establishing a Positive Work Environment

A total of 19 themes relating to how managers and leaders seek to establish a positive work environment in Africa with reference to Nigeria's oil and gas industry were identified. These themes were further grouped into three main categories which include: Being approachable, ability to tolerate mistakes from subordinates, and communicating effectively with subordinates (See Table 3).

Table 3: Sub-categories for Establishing Positive Work Environment

Sub-Categories for Establishing Positive Work Environment	Number of Themes
Being approachable	8
Communicating effectively	5
Ability to tolerate mistakes	4

As shown in Table 3, participants related that approachability was one of the ways through which leaders and managers in the oil and gas industry seek to establish positive work environment. This was portrayed in eight separate themes and was reported by 28 respondents which amount to approximately 65 percent of the total number of respondents. Being approachable was associated with managerial informality, listening attentively to the concerns of subordinates.

Similarly, effective communication was identified as another strategy through which leaders and managers in African oil and gas industry create positive work environments for their subordinates. This was reflected in five themes and reported by 32 respondents which represent approximately 74 percent of the total number of respondents. Effective communication was associated with providing clear instructions in relation to a given task, setting standards and guidelines for work - respondent from Libreville, providing feedback for tasks completed, and having effective interactions with subordinates - respondent from Nigeria.

Lastly, the ability to tolerate mistakes made by subordinates was identified as a useful strategy through which leaders and managers can create positive work environments. In this regard, a total of four themes were related to the ability to tolerate mistakes, and these were reported by 35 participants, approximately 81 percent of the total number of participants. Ability to tolerate

mistakes was associated with acknowledging and appreciating honest efforts that fail to yield the intended results.

Table 4: Extent to which leaders seek to establish positive work environments

Variables	Participants	Percentage
Approachability	34	79
Effective Communication	30	70
Tolerance to errors/mistakes	16	37

On the extent to which leaders and managers in the oil and gas industry are able to establish positive work environments (See Table 4), findings of this study indicate high scores of 79 percent and 70 percent for approachability and effective communication, respectively. However, a low score of 37 percent was recorded in relation to the ability to tolerate mistakes. This suggests that in the application of strengths-based approach to leadership, there is need to focus on being more tolerant to errors and mistakes made by subordinates. According to one of the participants from Gabon,

*...one of my colleagues was fired for not putting on his safety helmets. I understand that this was an error which could possibly lead to hazards in the workplace. However, a simple warning or other forms of punishment would have been enough, rather than an outright dismissal.*

Another participant from Lagos remarked that managers in her firm were very intolerant to errors. According to her,

*it is so easy to dismiss someone. No one cares about how many years you have served. Very simple mistakes can cost you your job here. Simple mistakes such as failing to put on your seat belts while driving within the premises as well as failure to adhere to safety procedures. Our jobs are simply not assured here.*

## 2.2 Developing the Capacity of Subordinates

A total of 12 themes were associated with developing the capacity of subordinates in Nigeria's oil and gas industry. These themes were divided into three main categories including: identifying strengths and weaknesses, encouraging personal and professional development, as well as coaching and mentoring subordinates (See Table 5).

Table 5: Categories of themes associated with developing the capacity of subordinates

Sub-Categories for Developing Subordinates	Number of Themes
Identifying strengths and weaknesses	5
Encouraging personal and professional development	5
Coaching and Mentoring Subordinates	2

Table 6: Extent to which leaders seek to develop the capacity of subordinates

Variables	Participants	Percent
Encouraging personal and professional development	38	91
Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses	29	67
Coaching and mentoring subordinates	12	28

As seen in Table 6, majority of participants (91%) report that leaders and managers in oil and gas firms often make significant contributions towards the personal and professional development of subordinates, and this is often reflected in workshops, seminars, as well as conferences. According to one of the participants,

*On a regular basis, selected employees are enrolled for seminars and conferences that focus on personal and professional development. Some staff are even sent abroad to complete some professional courses at the expense of the firm.*

Another participant remarked that

*...I was employed with only one degree, but since I started working here, I have not only obtained an additional degree, but I have also acquired over five certificates and diplomas. The company did not pay for all my personal and professional development programmes, but they provided enabling conditions by approving a paid study leave.*

Similarly, majority of participants (67%) noted that leaders seek to develop the capacity of their subordinates by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As reported by the study participants, this is often reflected in carrying out random personal observations for staff, as well as assigning specific tasks in order to evaluate a subordinate's skills as well as level of knowledge. According to one of the participants,

*...sometimes we assign tasks to people simply because we want to determine what they can do and what they cannot do. The end products of such tasks are usually of little or no relevance to the company but are designed to help managers identify and tabulate the strengths and weaknesses of their subordinates.*

In the same vein, another participant reported that

*My managers know my areas of strengths, and over the years I noticed they try to make sure that I am given tasks that align with my areas of strength. I initially thought this was a case of favouritism until I got interacting with some of my colleagues. This was when I realised that tasks were assigned to each of us according to our strengths and weaknesses.*

Nevertheless, while majority of respondents reported that leaders often encourage personal and professional development of their subordinates, and equally seek to identify and develop the

strengths of subordinates, majority of respondents (72%) reported that leaders and managers fail to coach or mentor subordinates. The following excerpts from the interviews conducted in this study are noteworthy.

*My manager simply gives instructions in relation to the tasks we need to complete. He rarely takes his time to coach or mentor us. I understand that this is possibly because of his workload, especially since he has over 20 employees who directly report to him. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the fact that I have hardly ever received coaching or mentoring from him.*

*I understand the importance of coaching and mentoring but oil and gas is a serious business. There is real pressure for us to deliver on our target. As such, we do not have the time for coaching and mentoring, as one may easily observe in other less demanding sectors.*

### **3. Discussion**

Findings obtained from the interview of participants provide answers to the research questions guiding the study. On the extent to which leaders and managers tend to imbibe principles of strengths-based leadership in their relationship with subordinates, this study finds that within the oil and gas industry, leaders actively seek to build positive work environments and develop the competencies of their subordinates.

Establishing a positive work environment is one of the core elements of strengths-based leadership. According to Lee (2014), establishing a positive work environment is concerned with creating an engaging environment where employees feel acknowledged, safe and supported to achieve set goals. Available evidence suggests that companies and organizations that create positive work environments have a positive psychological impact on employees, and that this is associated with improvements in job performance (Hanaysha, 2016; Massoudi & Hamdi, 2017; Olynick & Li, 2020).

This present study identifies three main strategies through which organizations can create positive work environments for employees. However, findings of the study indicate that the two main aspects that are directly applied by oil and gas firms include approachability and effective communication. According to Costa et al (2018), approachable leaders and managers easily build strong teams which are based on confidence and trust. In an empirical study conducted by Xie et al (2018), it was noted that approachable leaders are more likely to build effective and cohesive teams than leaders who are not approachable. According to Beadle (2020), approachability is a key attribute of strengths-based leaders and is necessary for building positive work environments.

In the same vein, effective communication was identified in this present study as another useful tool for establishing positive work environments in the African oil and gas industry. Findings of this study agree with the results obtained from similar studies. For instance, a study conducted by Silla et al (2017) finds that effective communication creates trust and a perception of support, thereby helping to create a positive work environment. A related study by Hartinah et al (2020) reports that communication is a vital tool for preventing conflict within the

workplace environment, reasons for which effective communication is a necessary requirement for developing positive work environments. Beadle (2020) maintains that considering the association between communication and the development of positive work environments, effective communication is considered as one of the main pillars of the strengths-based model of leadership.

Developing the competencies of subordinates is also identified as another way through which leaders in the African oil and gas industry adhere to the principles of strengths-based model of leadership. Three themes were identified in relation to how leaders/managers in the oil and gas industry develop subordinates' competencies. These include: Identifying strengths and weaknesses, encouraging personal and professional development, as well as coaching and mentoring subordinates. The study finds that leaders in the oil and gas industry tend to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their subordinates. This is in line with the findings of Al Busaidi (2020) who reported that leaders in the oil and gas industry in Oman tend to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their subordinates in order to assign role that align with individual strengths. Similar findings that agree with the result of this present study have also been obtained in studies such as Acquah (2019) and Gerard (2019).

However, in finding answers to the second research question (*What aspects of strengths-based leadership require further development among leaders and managers in the African oil and gas industry?*), this study finds that leaders and managers seldom engage in coaching and mentoring activities. This agrees with the findings of Acquah (2019) which note that leaders and managers in oil and gas firms do not always engage their subordinates in coaching and mentoring. This study finds that a possible explanation for the failure of leaders/managers to engage in coaching and mentoring activities is the workload which often puts the managers/leaders under pressure to meet a set target. Acquah (2019) stresses that burdensome workloads often hamper the ability of leaders and managers in the oil and gas sector to optimally carry out their leadership functions. However, a different finding was obtained in the study by Gerard (2019), as the study finds that leaders and managers in the oil and gas sector often provide coaching and mentoring services to aid in developing the strengths of their subordinates. This disparity of findings can easily be attributed to the geographical differences between this present study and the study by Gerard (2019).

Also, findings of the study reveal that leaders/managers in Nigeria's oil and gas industry are often intolerant to errors and mistakes from subordinates. Intolerance to errors and mistakes suggests that rather than focusing on the strengths of employees and subordinates, leaders/managers tend to focus and punish subordinates based on their errors which signify weaknesses. This finding agrees with that of Quintino et al (2015) who stress that oil companies generally have a zero tolerance for errors and risks, as they often prioritize safety issues. Similarly, Bryn & Muller (2017) stress that while oil and gas operators tend to have zero tolerance for risks and errors, there is need for improved tolerance management, as this will improve employee motivation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study undertook to investigate the application of strengths-based leadership in the African oil and gas industry. The study finds that there are some notable practices in Gabon and Nigeria's oil and gas industry which conform with the core principles of the strengths-based

approach to leadership. However, two main principles of strengths-based leadership are noted to be conspicuously disregarded in Nigeria's oil and gas industry. These include tolerance to risks and errors as well as coaching and mentoring subordinates. These aspects of strengths-based leadership are crucial for creating positive workplace environments and developing the competencies of subordinates. These two factors are noted to be associated with enhanced job performance and employee motivation. Nevertheless, there is need for larger studies involving a higher number of participants, as this will make it possible for researchers to make accurate generalizations in relation to the application of strengths-based leadership to the African oil and gas industry.

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