

BAM 2023 CONFERENCE



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Unmasking Entrepreneurial Leadership: A look at the aspects by which entrepreneurial leaders influence small businesses.

Kingsley Obinna Omeihe
University of the West of Scotland
Ibiyemi Omeihe
University of West of the Scotland



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Kingsley Obi Omeihe
School of Business and Creative
Industries
University of the
West of Scotland
Paisley, Scotland, UK PA1 2BE
(Corresponding Author)

king.omeihe@uws.ac.uk

Ibiyemi Omeihe
School of Business and Creative Industries
University of the West of
Scotland Paisley, PA1 2BE
United Kingdom
E-mail: ibiyemi.omeihe@uws.ac.uk

Abstract. The following paper delves into the emerging field of entrepreneurial leadership in small businesses. The research focuses on the context of entrepreneurial leadership and presents findings based on the narratives of Nigerian business owners. Through the use of field data and existing literature, a formal definition of entrepreneurial leadership is proposed, along with the introduction of entrepreneurial relational characteristics, attributes, and skills. The study highlights the socially constructed nature of entrepreneurial leadership and emphasises the importance of selective and strategic attributes. Additionally, the paper identifies empathy and people management as the dominant relational characteristics. The paper provides practical and policy implications and suggests directions for future research.

1. Introduction

A striking feature of contemporary investigations about failures in small businesses, is that leadership styles and behaviour are regarded as the source of its larger problems. The prescribed remedy is that leaders must seek new ways to stimulate business creativity (Chen *et al.*, 2013; Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Cai *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, the usual manner of related prescriptions seems to imply that leadership styles can constrain or accelerate business momentum (Omeihe *et al.*, 2021; Harrison *et al.*, 2020). Yet, despite the effectiveness and wider application of traditional leadership styles, such as transformational leadership which portrays leaders as visionaries and charismatics (Bass and Avolio, 1995; Gong *et al.*, 2009; Ling *et al.*, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 2009; Leitch and Volery, 2017), there is no place for doubts about a leadership style that performs well in entrepreneurial ventures. Such a style should obviously not be at odds with other well-known lines of argument but must be able to function if appropriately anchored between the nexus of leadership and entrepreneurship.

An appropriate leadership style, in this case, can be acknowledged as one that explores the linkages between entrepreneurship and leadership. Yet, notably enough, it is a style that influences an organised group towards set goal achievements (House *et al.*, 1999; Renko *et al.*, 2015), rather than one that is management focused on coordination (Zaleznik, 1977; Michael *et al.*, 2002) and planning (Omeihe *et al.*, 2020) that is needed. Viewed in this light, entrepreneurial leadership underscores the above line of argument. As a construct, its distinct attractiveness lies in the premise that success for businesses within competitive environments requires leaders that possess entrepreneurial mindsets, but more importantly capable of fostering rapid change (Ireland *et al.*, 2003; Renko *et al.*, 2015; Kesidou and Carter, 2018).

This present paper aims to expand the discourse on entrepreneurial leadership in light of recent scholarship within the field. More precisely, the paper aims to make two central points. In the first point, we reflect on definitions and the contributions this perspective brings to the analysis of leadership. We commence by defining entrepreneurial leadership and illustrate, by selecting a review of the literature to emphasise how it provides a headway to resolving the tensions and limitations highlighted by leadership scholars. The second point that this paper makes is that many leadership styles are not sufficient in making followers achieve goals and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities. For small businesses, they need to be supported by a leadership style aimed at directing and influencing the performance of employees towards exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities. Such a precondition guides us to the verdict that the leadership fabric of small businesses matters importantly and, to the extent that success within highly competitive contexts, demands leaders who are innovative, possess an entrepreneurial mindset and can necessarily determine rapid change trajectories.

In fact, there is no way in which businesses can be sustained without an open, autonomous, supportive and nurturing environment (Renko *et al.*, 2015; Strobl *et al.*, 2022), that perhaps are ascribed as core components which, among a number of things, help effectuate appropriate direction. In this paper, our intellectual effort advances a version of leadership that addresses issues from an entrepreneurial perspective in which leaders are seen to be more spontaneous towards influencing followers to achieve business goals.

Viewed in this perspective, entrepreneurial leadership can generally be thought of inspiring and influencing others to recognise opportunities valuable to an organisation. However, its essence can further be accentuated if examined via a contextual lens. And perhaps this may unravel its key elements. As pointed out by Kuratko: ‘entrepreneurial leadership is becoming a global necessity and the more we can understand the elements that comprise this concept, the more we can advance the concept itself’ (Kuratko, 2007: 8). Hence, scholars interested in the prospects of advancing entrepreneurial leadership should commence pondering over the possibility that a broader and more contextualised version of entrepreneurial leadership can situate its elements within a social and cultural context.

The outline of this paper is divided into five sections, the first of which describes the elements of entrepreneurial leadership. Our work thus far has made it clear that entrepreneurial

leadership is made up of distinct elements. The central aim of this section is to arrive at a more definitive conceptualisation of the construct. In the second section, we discuss the interconnections between leadership and entrepreneurship and then relate these functional interconnections to small businesses. In the third section, attention is devoted to methodological considerations. More precisely, we describe the qualitative techniques and underscore the focus on pertinent issues through a rich description of the results. In section four, focus is shifted to the discussion. We examine from vantage points the analysis of our findings to demonstrate how assumptions about entrepreneurial leadership shape our contextual understanding and how these, in turn, shape scholarly claims about the true essence of the construct. Section five concludes the article and discusses the broader implications of entrepreneurial leadership as an essential driver of small businesses. Our hope is that this article can serve as a resource for future studies on entrepreneurial leadership.

2. The Social Elements of Entrepreneurial Leadership

There is a growing recognition today that entrepreneurial leadership determines a firm's response to new market opportunities and improved performance. The exact description of this recognition has been captured in a distinctly convincing manner by Strobl *et al.*, (2022). From their perspective, entrepreneurial leadership incorporates stewardship principles seeking to transform firm's members into entrepreneurial agents. Of course, stewardship here is associated with the facilitation and empowerment of leadership practices for business growth (Davis *et al.*, 1997). The role of stewardship as a compelling factor conveys the notion that entrepreneurial leadership is based on trust and less formalisation, in so far as leaders are committed to empowerment rather than by what Strobl and colleagues have suggestively referred to as 'self-serving actions' (Strobl *et al.*, 2022: p2). According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), it is absolutely these characteristics that position firms and members within them, to be flexible, agile and adaptive in the face of complex challenges.

In explaining how entrepreneurial leadership represents a specific resource for entrepreneurs that differs markedly from other leadership styles, Gupta *et al.*, (2004) succeeded in capturing the profound implications of achieving a firm's core values. For firms, entrepreneurial leaders are keen to embrace the coordination and motivation of their firms' operative systems and the functions needed to achieve their core values. As a result, the discharge of these responsibilities

serves to enable members to seize opportunities, innovate processes, take risks and improve dynamic competencies. Therefore, entrepreneurial leaders are not just recognised because they affect a firm's ability to take risks, innovate and behave decisively (Engelen *et al.*, 2015; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021); in fact, they are recognised because they exercise greater discretion which consequently has a richer bearing on the firm's strategic performance. In such contexts, entrepreneurial success is strongly dependent on leaders who can inspire creativity, goal-directed behaviour, and firm performance (Mumford *et al.*, 2002; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2002; Coglisier *et al.*, 2004). As Leitch and Volery (2017) state, it is leaders who are innovative, understand how to manage risks and uncertainties and are proactive that can sustain growth. In other words, entrepreneurial leaders are people who can articulate a vision and influence employees towards achieving precise outcomes.

The crux of the matter is that several studies have examined entrepreneurial leadership but have not sufficiently demonstrated how it permeates the functioning of small businesses. The main message here is that as small businesses continually explore market opportunities and modify business models, having entrepreneurial leaders at the helm, provides a source of competitive advantage. And it is precisely the challenge for entrepreneurial leaders to create a marketplace for ideas within their businesses, towards encouraging employees to actualise such ideas (Kuratko, 2007). The social elements of entrepreneurial leadership thus appear to converge around two main areas: creativity, flexibility, facilitation, motivation, empowerment, greater discretion and risk-taking (on the part of the leader); responsiveness, agility, ideation, innovativeness, proactiveness and motivation (on the part of the followers). One need not agree with all the elements captured above, yet it is difficult to ignore that conceptualisations of entrepreneurial leadership build on these characteristics. In particular, these elements are considered essential for small businesses, since they foster adaptation to changing environments.

3. The Problem for Entrepreneurial Leadership

The discussion presented in the second section of this article has led to the conclusion that the existing literature is not sufficient to solve the problem of entrepreneurial leadership when examined with care. Progress to date has been hindered by a dearth of research devoted to its conceptual development. And perhaps, due to a paucity of contextual interpretations of a leader's entrepreneurial characteristics. Scholars still have an important role that goes far beyond defining entrepreneurial leadership. Recognising this much, the problem of entrepreneurial leadership for small businesses is not solved, however. Indeed, it will be relatively helpful to step back and explore frameworks that have been developed for understanding entrepreneurial leadership. As a matter of fact, when small businesses operate, it is argued that leadership structures should reflect entrepreneurial-associated characteristics such as problem-solving and being action-oriented (Fernald *et al.*, 2005). Particularly in challenging contexts such as emerging markets where higher levels of uncertainty and ambiguity are common (Welter and Smallbone, 2011; Omeihe *et al.*, 2021), entrepreneurial leaders may thus be actively ready to absorb uncertainty, assume flexibility and forge commitments, even in the face of related challenges.

As pointed out by Chen (2007) with the case of new ventures in mind, it is essential to envisage such a scenario to followers, convincing them that the scenario is achievable. The clear difficulty with this prescription is that it may prove difficult to achieve if entrepreneurial leaders are unable to design visionary scenarios. To a greater extent, it can be largely ineffectual, if leaders are unable to galvanise the support of a set of interdependent followers committed to achieving the vision (Gupta *et al.*, 2004; Chen, 2007). As a consequence, entrepreneurial leaders understand that they must possess good communication skills, the propensity to be tolerant of ambiguity, and be creative with the ability to empower followers. If these are not present, followers may be incited to abandon the vision. Clearly, the fundamental problem for entrepreneurial leaders cannot be solved using a broad-brush approach. To achieve strategic scenarios, entrepreneurial leaders would need to recognise potential opportunities, facilitate idea generation and provide autonomy to their followers. This approach, which comes down to espousing the goal of collective performance, has considerable merits in developing competitive advantage for small businesses. Such behaviours and characteristics are bound to shape the success of small businesses. For one thing, the question becomes one of establishing how entrepreneurial a leader is. As noted by Kuratko (2007): 'the answer to this question lies in the three underlying dimensions of entrepreneurship: innovativeness, risk-taking and proactiveness'. For another thing, to the extent that these

dimensions enhance businesses, honesty, character and integrity should form the basis of the decision-making process. When leaders place a high value on them, it is assumed that this will create higher moral cognitive development among followers. Kuratko who clearly perceived the same fact recognises that'entrepreneurial companies frequently set a higher bar in terms of what is acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour' (2007; pg7). To have a good analytical grasp of the precise nature of entrepreneurial leadership, it is useful to present the empirics employed in this research. In what follows, it is viewed that a contextualised version of entrepreneurial leadership is an expectation of the right kind.

4. Methodology

Research setting and method

Our fieldwork took us beyond conceptualisations in the existing literature on entrepreneurial leadership to arrive at a more interpretive perspective of the construct. We routinely identified a conscious tendency for participants within our sample to ignore several of the commonly recognised definitions and standards, insisting instead on giving an account of their own interpretation. In our readings of Welter and Baker's (2021) work on moving contexts onto new roads, we were struck by their call for more attention to be paid to the diversity of contexts. For this purpose, we responded by incorporating insights into how contextual narratives may play a part in constructing everyday entrepreneurial leadership. Following Omeihe (2019), we relied on a snowball sample rather than a random selection, commencing with designers from earlier professional contacts. An effort was made to ensure that our sampling procedure captured participants with specific characteristics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Crammond *et al.*, 2018; 2022). Our study focused on 14 small business owner-managers in Nigeria engaged in bespoke fashion and (to a lesser extent) retail. We comply with our informant's description of these owner-managers as 'designers' very often, but most times we refer to them as 'leaders'. The selected designers were between 35 to 62 years old, male (about 12.5%), and female (87.5%) with most (81.25%) having a BSc or MBA degree. The designers deal in the business of wholesale and manufacturing of apparel within Nigeria and in parts of West Africa. Table 1 briefly describes the participants' profiles, employee size and type. We have altered the identity and some inconsequential details to maintain anonymity.

Online interviews

From the outset, we realised that the diversity of the designers' experiences would have been lost through a quantitative approach. As such, we were motivated to capture the richness of entrepreneurial leadership by allowing the participants to give an account of their experiences. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 2018 through March 2019. The content of our interview guide was based on a rough protocol developed prior to the pilot studies. Two pilot studies were conducted with supervisors of a fashion business. The preliminary data influenced the content of our semi-structured interviews and was useful in refining our questions. For the main data collection, we focused on interviewing the designers/owners, to gather insights that resulted from their leadership. We adopted this approach because we wanted to induce self-insights leading to new discoveries from the leaders themselves, and not their employees (Omeihe, 2023). Interview notes were written after each meeting.

Following Yin (2014), the richness of the semi-structured interviews was dependent on our ability to develop rapport with the respondents. This consisted of open-ended questions which were useful in pursuing engaging lines of discussions. We commenced each interview with a research question: *what does entrepreneurial leadership mean to you?* In addition, we asked questions about the essential attributes of success, including skills and challenges. The conversations with the designers allowed the participants to recount their unique narratives and this enhanced our knowledge of these topics. We undertook retrospective interviews with all the participants which were transcribed. We asked them to describe how they inspire idea generation, creativity, goal-directed behaviour, and how they generated firm performance. Finally, we asked them if they believed they possessed any entrepreneurial skills.

Table 1: Profile of participating designers

Participant no.	Years in business	Business Location	Number of employees	Employee type	Age	Gender	Educational Level
Designer 1	5	Abuja	3	3 Permanent and contract staff	35	Female	First degree
Designer 2	6	Abuja	2	Permanent	35	Male	Informal
Designer 3	5	Abuja and Kogi	7	Permanent	25	Male	Informal
Designer 4	2	Abuja	4	Permanent	32	Female	MBA
Designer 5	6	Kwara	7	Permanent	30	Female	First degree
Designer 6	12	Abuja/USA	2	2 Permanent and contract staff	31	Female	MBA
Designer 7	10	Lagos	15	Permanent	35	Female	First degree
Designer 8	7	Abuja	7	2 Permanent and 5 contract staff	30	Female	First degree
Designer 9	6	Abuja	Based on business needs	Contract	40	Female	First degree
Designer 10	4	Abuja	4	4 Permanent and contract staff	31	Female	First degree
Designer 11	1	Abuja	Based on business needs	All contract	30	Female	First degree
Designer 12	1	Abuja	4	4 Permanent and contract staff	30	Female	First degree
Designer 13	8	Lagos	10	Permanent	40	Female	First degree
Designer 14	32	Lagos and Onitsha	22	Permanent	62	Female	Informal

Case studies

Our second data source involved case studies initiated during the data collection phase of the study. The choice to adopt a case study strategy is consistent with the trend of examining contemporary phenomena difficult to divorce from their real-life context (Amoako and Matlay, 2015; Omeihe *et al.*, 2020). We followed a protocol to enable a transparent set of procedures with the possibilities for replication. This increased the reliability of the cases and involved episodes in which the designers succeeded in creating new trends and communicating their vision. We relied on Yin's (2014) within-case and cross-case technique which allowed the analysis of respective cases as part of a single case. We felt the variations were useful in advancing theory. We documented evidence by relying on specific quotes to build rich narratives. Overall, we found the case study reliable for explaining a new phenomenon.

Analytic strategy

We organised our analytical strategy according to established procedures for thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006), and worked recursively between the multiple cases (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Our qualitative analysis entailed a systematic comparison of codes. We relied on the qualitative software package QSR Nvivo to code data against overarching themes such as empathy, people management, team building, collaboration and interpersonal skills. The analysis of our data was focused on identifying elements that made the leaders entrepreneurial. Our coding methodology was drawn on known issues from literature and the true narratives of the designers themselves. We analysed the transcriptions by examining the cases comparatively. An important long list of codes was modified into various themes. We then organised the process by sorting coded cases to develop an overarching set of themes, following the identification of key patterns and gradually making comparisons of the interviewees' narratives. During the iterative process of interrogating our data, we focused on the validity of the themes to ensure that those overlooked in the earlier coding process were reviewed. The emergent themes are what we feature in our reporting. As we cycled through the data, we applied quotes to the respective cases which were further reviewed. This was useful in achieving a true depiction of the participants' narratives. In introducing our findings, we draw on a combination of quotes, examples and illustrative tables to report our data. This helped establish evidence of the diversity and entrepreneurial distinctiveness of the participants. As a result, our understanding of entrepreneurial leadership evolved and has become more precise. The next section follows an in-depth analysis to discuss the findings of this article.

5. Findings

In this section, we specify exactly the general case evidence on entrepreneurial leadership which follows from our analysis of the participant's responses. The section addresses several important areas that would allow for a richer understanding of the concept.

5.1 Entrepreneurial leadership skills that drive business success

The usual approach to the study of entrepreneurial leadership is usually through the study of traits. In our findings, there is clear evidence that leadership is not just a trait but rather a complex combination of many skills. The question to be answered, of course, is concerned with the precise nature of those skills. The first of these skills is well expected. As a matter of fact, the most striking feature of the findings is the overwhelmingly high consensus that technical skills are important for business success. When probed further, one of the designers summed up the excerpt below:

I had to attend fashion school so that I will not become obsolete. As a leader, you need that formal learning. This implies that you must acquire the right technical knowledge. This will contribute to the technical skills needed to drive the business (Case, 14).

The designers for their part, specifically emphasised technical skills as important to achieving business goals. The unique insights reveal that small business success relies to a greater extent, on leaders who have strong technical skills to drive innovation. Considering our findings, another distinctive skill of entrepreneurial leaders is that they can identify customers' needs by providing the right services and products. As a matter of fact, all the designers expressed a positive perception regarding marketing skills. The multiple responses indicated that more than half of the cases (10/14), cited marketing skills as useful in shaping their entrepreneurial endeavour. One of the designers sums up their explanation below:

Basically, your desirability as a brand is what mostly sells you. If you are functioning in a space where people do not like the language of the brand, that means you need to improve your marketing skill. For us leaders, the language of the brand comes from deliberate attempts to communicate the brand to our audience. Without these skills, you will struggle to drive your business (Case 8).

From the above excerpt, one arrives at the conclusion that entrepreneurial leaders concentrate on analysing market perception towards driving business growth. By enacting marketing skills in their (entrepreneurial) leadership practice, they make informed decisions about their brand awareness and increased sales.

5.2 Personalised relationships used in the context of Entrepreneurial leadership

In view of the participants' leadership experience, small business owners in Nigeria were more likely to rely on personalised relationships to inspire employee attitudes and behaviour. Such relational characteristics involved stimulating influence over employee creativity. Often, these relationships ascribe the leader's ability to manage employee behaviour effectively. More specifically, the personalised relationships found in the case studies were empathy and people management (as shown in table 2).

Table 2. Personalised relationships of cases by gender

Personalised relationships			
	Female <i>N</i> =12	Male <i>N</i> =2	Sample Total <i>N</i> =14
Empathy	12	0	12
People Management	12	2	14

Table 2 indicates that all twelve female participants acknowledged the distinct importance of empathy for their followers. Given the above, the (female) participants recognise that demonstrating empathy is what distinguishes entrepreneurial leaders from others. In fact, entrepreneurial leadership not only requires one to respond in a way that is understanding of their followers' needs, but also demands that leaders are respectful of them. We encountered persistent evidence that more than half of the female participants (7/12), suggested that empathy is linked to employee performance. Similarly, others (8/12) maintain that empathy shapes the responses and reactions of employees to the demands of the business. We frequently observed that empathy occurred more frequently across the participants with more interesting results on the business. The underlying similarities across the narrative characterise empathy as a described emotion, that shapes the reactions and responses of followers to business demands. Although we did not encounter evidence of empathy from the male participants, all the participants explained that people management promotes a sense of leading employees towards goal realisation. To illustrate:

I think that businesses will thrive when you are able to manage your employees' expectations and needs. Because if you are unable to improve employee morale, they would act contrary to your ideas. This can be disruptive and may lead to business demise. More than anything else, a good leader enhances employee engagement, such that your followers remain committed to your vision (Case 5).

As explained by case 5, the importance of this finding is clear when one considers that leaders are effective when employees become your competitive advantage. Indeed, it is interesting to observe that leaders succeed in attaining entrepreneurial leadership through the techniques they employ. In other words, a poorly managed set of employees will negatively impact key aspects of the business. Our analysis of the qualitative data is consistent with the view that poor people management poses an extreme threat to the leader's credibility. While different situations demand different approaches, (entrepreneurial) leadership involves being self-aware of the emotions, desires and expectations of group members.

5.3 Attributes shaping entrepreneurial leadership development

We found another strikingly important aspect of entrepreneurial leadership. The impact of the attributes we identified varied slightly from those espoused in the literature. In each of the examples, as in most of the instances in which attributes were mentioned, we witnessed explanations of attributes in a way that is not described or expressed in contemporary entrepreneurial leadership literature. Evidence of the essence of attributes comes from references to cultural norms of fairness and honesty. Religious and cultural influences were found to create a powerful mechanism for understanding human behaviour, whether it is the behaviour of the leaders or that of their successors. Possessing these attributes involved an awareness of acceptable or unacceptable norms, and the consciousness to adhere to or refute them. To gain additional insights, when asked to identify entrepreneurial leadership attributes in themselves as well as employees identified as likely successors, a total of 28 categories were identified from self-appraisals and the identified successors. Table 3 presents examples and descriptions regarding the prevalence of the attributes across the participants.

Table 3. Attributes of Entrepreneurial Leaders

No	Attributes	Description	Number of respondents
1.	Authentic	Being true to oneself, one's brand	5
2.	Committed	Dedicated and always seeking to go the extra mile	6
3.	Confident	Bold and courageous	5
4.	Consistent	Unchanging and sticking to your craft	8
5.	Creative	Developing something new, ideation, bringing out designs, being original	14
6.	Determined	Never giving up, can-do attitude, strong-willed.	5
7.	Enterprising	Resourcefulness and showing initiative	2
8.	Ethical	Good conduct and moral principles	4
9.	Excellent	Success and outstanding approach	3
10.	Fair	Impartial, without discrimination	4
11.	Resilient	Tough and adaptable	6
12.	Hardworking	Eager to work, diligent	10
13.	Humble	Willing to learn and relearn, meek, respectful	7
14.	Innovative	Forward-thinking, new designs, introducing new trends	12
15.	Intelligent	A quick study, technical knowledge	4
16.	Honest	Keeping to promises and delivering	6
17.	Loyal	Length of service, constant, tested and trusted	11
18.	Optimistic	Positive expectation that things work out	2
19.	Passionate	Love the job, love the craft	12
20.	Patient	Calm	6
21.	Persevering	Persistence	7
22.	Persuasive	Convincing	7
23.	Proactive	Naturally think, not waiting for instructions	7
24.	Reliable	Dependable	7
25.	Kind	Amiable	8
26.	Team player	Able to coordinate	8
27.	Trustworthy	Principled and upright	7
28.	Visionary	Long term view	14

In addition to the 28 attributes, we found that several of the designers (6/14) relied on a second pattern of four core attributes in their likely selection of successors. We refer to this second pattern as ‘selective attributes’ because they determine followers who can lead the business. These selective attributes consist of hard work, long-term view, passion and length of service (also described as loyalty). We found that these attributes reinforced one another, but more importantly, depict the successors’ dedication. Case 7 provides a good example, particularly regarding succession:

.... he is dedicated to his craft and understands the functioning of the business. I do not need to look far, so it will be him and.... he has been with me the longest anyway (Case 7).

In Case 7’s estimate, a likely successor must display all four of the selective attributes. Moreover, it is impressive how these selected attributes underscore the notion that entrepreneurial leadership relies primarily on identifying emerging leaders who possess core ‘selective attributes’ and can influence others to create opportunities.

Table 4. A summary of selective and strategic attributes

Attributes	Category N= 6	Attribute	Category N=8
Hard work	Selective Attributes	Creativity	Strategic attributes
Long term view	Selective Attributes	Innovation	Strategic attributes
Passion	Selective Attributes	Vision	Strategic attributes
Length of service	Selective Attributes		

In 8 other cases, we also observed a narrower use of attributes, which appear to be very distinctive in how they allow businesses to survive and function. This consists of creativity, innovation and vision. In each of these cases, the participants responded that employees who possessed these three attributes (being visionaries, creative, and innovative) possessed the capacity to take on new challenges and solve substantial problems. They were also consistent in their acknowledgement of these 3 attributes drawn from the 28 categories previously identified as fundamental to business success. As a matter of fact, they all agreed that these attributes can encourage creative contributions towards the bigger picture. We refer to these

attributes as ‘strategic attributes’ as they promote belief in the creative endeavour to drive the business (see table 4).

6. Discussion

The interpretative perspective adopted in our data analysis provides useful insights through the designers’ narratives, which demonstrates the varied aspects by which entrepreneurial leadership can be best understood. Certainly, the results demonstrate emphatically that entrepreneurial leaders can recognise opportunities, create a vision, and mobilise followers to create value. Our study is largely consistent with prior scholarship that builds on Kuratko’s (2007) intuition, including studies that have touched upon the entrepreneurial leadership-follower link (Renko *et al.*, 2015; Newman *et al.*, 2017; Cai *et al.*, 2018). At variance with prior studies, however, we propose a category of 28 attributes to describe features that make leaders entrepreneurial. Taken as a whole, our findings clearly substantiate the stance that a contextualised view of entrepreneurial leadership contributes to a richer understanding and unlocks new research potential.

Our results further indicate that ‘selective attributes’ shape the identification of entrepreneurial leaders and represent a valuable theoretical contribution to our interpretation of entrepreneurial leadership. The attributes were found to reinforce one another and are useful for identifying potential successors. We noted, however, that when the functioning and survival of a business are considered, ‘strategic attributes’ imply that (entrepreneurial) leaders possess the means to take on new challenges and solve substantial problems. This further suggests that entrepreneurial leaders differ systematically in their approach to encouraging creative contributions.

A conceptualisation of entrepreneurial leadership that accounts for differences in skills, attributes and personal relationships would be effective beyond the sorts of generic definitions that we have come to know. On our part, a definition of entrepreneurial leadership that emerged through our findings is as follows: ‘creating visionary opportunities through selective and strategic attributes towards the achievement of value creation’. In line with this, we expect that further conceptualisations can help determine the uniqueness of entrepreneurial leadership behaviour across contexts. Scholars should ponder over the possibility that a more contextualised version can complement contemporary research on entrepreneurial leadership.

Beyond our findings, we can reflect on the broader opportunities that entrepreneurial leadership might offer. We foresee, for example, that entrepreneurial leadership attributes will receive a significant focus due in part to the global economic downturn. We expect that leaders will leverage entrepreneurial attributes to exploit market opportunities, generate preference over competition and adapt to economic changes. Equivalent survival advantages will accrue to small businesses operating in Africa and other emerging markets. As our findings indicate, personalised relationships may help entrepreneurial leaders stimulate influence over employee creativity and performance.

The notion of demonstrating empathy and people management as what defines entrepreneurial leaders has been particularly intriguing to us. It has been recognised that entrepreneurial leaders possess a variety of relational characteristics along with their willingness to be tolerant (Stuart and Abetti, 1990), virtuous (Kempster *et al.*, 2010) and motivating (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Bruegst *et al.*, 2012; Omeihe *et al.*, 2020a). For example, Sklaveniti (2017), showed that the relational aspect of entrepreneurial leadership sees the self and others as a process of mutual and continuous (re)construction. Besides, her study suggests that new ventures are defined by continuous relational achievements. Our findings suggest a simpler route. When one considers that leaders are effective when employees form the source of competitive advantage, a lack of empathy and a poorly managed set of employees will negatively impact key aspects of the business. This represents a practical and theoretical case that entrepreneurial leadership involves being self-aware of the emotions, desires and expectations of group members. We believe that a fuller conceptualisation of entrepreneurial leadership demands an investigation of personal relationships needed to inspire employee attitudes and behaviour.

Before summing up the discussions presented above, we would like to state that while our results may be overturned by future studies, we recommend more contextualised versions of entrepreneurial leadership. Of particular emphasis for future entrepreneurial leadership are as follows: a cross-country comparison of entrepreneurial leaders, the techniques of entrepreneurial leaders and the physiology of entrepreneurial leadership. These are but three of the future studies that may be considered, nevertheless we recognise that there are several others that would produce significant contributions. Meanwhile, perhaps the findings presented

in this paper would stimulate further discussion and interest in the attributes, skills and personalised relations of entrepreneurial leaders.

7. Conclusion

In a domain where the growing diversity of entrepreneurial leadership and small business contexts have been ignored by scholars, practitioners and policymakers alike, this paper has examined how entrepreneurial leadership pays off for small businesses. For policymakers, there is an obvious imperative to endorse and cater for programmes that accelerate entrepreneurial leadership development. Our experience with entrepreneurial leaders highlights a lack of awareness of policy support and a narrow understanding of entrepreneurial leadership. In effect, policy prescriptions should seek to enhance the knowledge of small business leaders and facilitate the actual orientation of entrepreneurial leadership.

7.1 Implications of the study

Several broader implications follow from this study. More sustained commitment to entrepreneurial leadership research is needed. As captured in this study, a contextualised investigation can contribute to a richer understanding of entrepreneurial leadership as it applies to small businesses. Extending entrepreneurial leadership research will assist us in understanding various aspects of the enablers and constraints for entrepreneurial leadership, as well as contribute to the understanding of how entrepreneurial leaders can operate in uncertain environments. Second, further engagement with practitioners would bridge the gap between practitioners and policymakers. It would be interesting to see how a broader policy-practitioner nexus can sensitise an understanding of entrepreneurial leadership across communities and businesses. This casts into prompt relief the opportunity to augment evidence emerging from dialogue, experiences and research recommendations. We recognise that this can be of utmost importance for policymakers interested in concrete outcomes and broadens the notion of what it is to be an entrepreneurial leader. As the study here illustrates, entrepreneurial leaders can recognise opportunities, create a vision, and mobilise followers to create economic value. Finally, regarding theory, our choice of a qualitative study enabled us to move beyond numerical analysis to address how Nigerian small business owners interpret entrepreneurial leadership. In particular, this approach allowed us to capture the participants' 'pure' experience of entrepreneurial leadership. It goes without saying, this is a limitation of quantitative methods. Following Mollering (2006), it is therefore imperative that future qualitative studies

on entrepreneurial leadership present findings in a manner that they can be related to future studies and previous findings.

7.2 Limitations of the study

Despite the wider implications, we have identified some limitations. This present study is based on semi-structured interviews with Nigerian small business owners. However, the interview approach may require a longitudinal approach since participants are prone to embellish their narratives within an embedded context. As Gracia and Welter (2013) remind us, that a longitudinal approach would help identify if there are any changes in the construction of narratives. Additional research will be required to test the attributes we introduced and their usefulness across contexts. The second relates to the extent to which our research can be contextualised. We believe there is the potential for further enhancements through comparative research of entrepreneurial leaders. In closing, it is pertinent to recall that our study has proposed a set of attributes, skills and relational characteristics. We contend that undertaking a systematic study can further the entrepreneurial leadership paradigm.

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