ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP ROLE IN CORPORATE GOVERNANCE FOR ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE NIGERIA

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Abstract

The rapid changes experienced in the business environment in Nigeria has imposed a serious threat for the survival of business organisations. Which has made organisations adopt various strategies for their survival. These strategies includes both morally and non-morally acceptable practices which has raised a question about the morality of leaders and organisations reputation. This study examine ethical decision making and leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance in Nigeria. Ethical decision making in an organisation is an important process, as it requires careful assessment and analysis of all possible alternatives or options, that are within the purview of corporate executives at all levels in the organisation to carry out this task. The study adopted qualitative research methodology, which relied on secondary source of data to arrive at its conclusion. The gap identified in the study is that leaders despite having knowledge of ethical practices still engage in unethical and unacceptable practices. The study examined the dimensions of ethical decision-making, the steps involved, theoretical review of the concept of consequentialism, and empirical review. The study concluded that mitigating unethical practices requires a collaboration of the private and public sectors in Nigeria, strengthening governance structures, accountability/ transparency, and sanctions for defaulters.

Keywords: Corporate governance, Ethical decision-making, Leadership, Organisational performance, Unethical practices.

Introduction

Organisations despite their sizes and nature of business, operates within the confines of an environment which is described as being unstable due to the constantly evolving nature of the stakeholder's (shareholders, customers, suppliers, government, and the entire public) preferences. The Nigeria business landscape is characterized by a high level of these practices is the high level of corruption, which has laid to lack of transparency, and a feeble institutional enforcement that has adversely affected the public and private sectors unethical practices, which are actions that are illegal or morally unacceptable by the larger society (Bonner et al., 2017). One of (Attah et al., 2021). To add, also to the unending list of unethical practices are the high rate of deception, fake, adulterated, expired, and sub-standard goods (Obi, 2025); and the manipulation of financial reports and other documents that are falsified to create an impression of an organisation's financial strength which are often utilized as a ploy to evade taxes, cover up fraud, and lure investors. Another area where unethical practices is rooted is the area of extortion, this pertains to the payment of facilitation fees to public officials to gain contracts, clearance, or to elude fines on non-regulatory compliance (Usman et al., 2012). These practices, to a large extent has impeded on the existence of business organisations and this has contributed to the collapse of highly profiled organisations in Nigeria (Tommasetti et al., 2021). Hence, organisations are left with no much of an option than to relay on making ethical decisions, which is a fundamental factor in determining organisational success and ensuring sustainable performance. Decision making helps organisations navigate through the complexities of the environment as they adapt to new technologies, achieving their goals, gaining competitive edge, and responding to external forces (marking dynamics, competition, and regulatory changes etc.), and managing complexities and uncertainties resulting from stakeholders preferences. Therefore, ethical decision-making becomes necessary to circumvent the bedevilment caused by unethical practices within the corporate landscape in Nigeria.

Ethical decision-making is the act of evaluating and selecting from alternatives in a way that is in tandem with principles and values that are regarded as being ethical. These principles are basic rules that governs what is right from wrong. For instance, honesty which is telling the truth and not deceiving others, justice which is relating to fairness and equitable treatment for all etc. while values are the beliefs about what is essential and obtainable in life, for example integrity, respect, loyalty, and standards which pertains to professional, organisational, and societal standards. According to Dunsford (2015), ethical decision-making refers to the method of assessing choices among alternatives in such a manner that aligns with moral guidelines. Ethical decision-making is that process according to (Flanagan, 2023) that pertains to evaluating and choosing from alternatives in a way that is consistent with ethical principles, this means that it is vital to perceive and eliminate options that are unethical and select the best ethical option. It is just more than choosing between right or wrong rather a well-structured and considered process that entails several elements such as acknowledging the ethical dimensions, gathering all relevant facts, and applying ethical framework in resolving issues. In the midst of this, leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance can never be over emphasized, as it entails the establishment of an ethical culture, setting of a clear vision, and aligning the organisational objectives with stakeholder's interest, and the implementation of an effective practices that will secure accountability and transparency. Leadership encourages adherence to a well-structured corporate governance framework that creates a conducive atmosphere of integrity, fairness, accountability, and focus which essential for maximizing and sustaining organisational performance. Haryanto et al (2024) describe leadership as a process that involves the deliberate engagement of subordinates to voluntary participate in achieving goals. The role of leadership in organisational success behooves on the fact that leader provides a clear vision, effective communication, and motivating the workforce towards achieving the goals (Baum & Amburgey, 2017).

While corporate governance is a system that pertains to rules, practices, and processes by which a corporation or an enterprise is directed and controlled. It is described as the set of laws, processes, and procedures that guides and manage an organisation (Bhagat & Bolton, 2019). This entails settling the numerous needs of owners, investors, customers, suppliers, government and the larger society. The rationale behind corporate governance is to build a framework that ensures an organisation operates within the core principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and responsibility. Which will help protect the interest of stakeholders and promotes long term sustainable value creation. This implies that organisations uses corporate governance to govern their activities by identifying who has authority and accountability, and who makes decisions and to ensure that a reliable decision-making processes and control are put in place to address or settle the interest of shareholders.

Thus, leadership role in securing organisational performance through corporate governance is not just an operational function, but rather a basic component that predicts the effectiveness of formal governance structure that influences performance. Organisational performance is the outcome of efficiently formulating and implementing a plan that determine an organisation's unique position in the market (Fuertes et al., 2020). This is by comparing performance to the goals and objectives of an organisation; which implies that performance is the success score against targets (Cho & Dansereau, 2010). It is on this note that this study seek to theoretically investigate the nexus between ethical decision-making and leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance in Nigeria.

The statement of the problem is that, despite the awareness of the consequences of ethical practices, the Nigerian organisational landscape is still characterized by a high level of unethical practices which has contributed to a high level of deception, an unfair labour practices, and the collapse of highly profiled organisations in Nigeria (Tommasetti et al., 2021). Tackling these issues requires the concerted effort from the private and public sectors, the strengthening of governance structures, ensuring accountability/ transparency, and putting in place an effective sanctions for defaulters.

The general objective of the study is to theoretically investigate the nexus between ethical decision-making and leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance in Nigeria. While the specific objective is to investigate whether leadership role in corporate governance can secure organisational performance in the long-term. The study will significantly provide leaders or manager with the need of making ethical decisions that translates to building reputation and earning stakeholder trust, confidence, and securing competitive advantage that results to organisational performance. It will provide the private and public sectors on the need to collaborate to strengthening governance structures, and culture by promoting accountability and transparency. The content scope is ethical decision-making and leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance in Nigeria. And the geographical scope is business organisations in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Ethical decision-making is not just about making decision, rather making decisions that aligns with moral principles and values which under plays mere adherence to laws or policies to make choice that are fair, responsible, and beneficial to all the parties involved. It is more than just choosing between right and wrong it is a well-structured and considered process that entails several elements such as acknowledging the ethical dimensions, gathering all relevant facts, and applying ethical frameworks in resolving ethical dilemmas (which is a situation whereby decision makers are confronted between two or more complex choices of making a decision especially when the two are valid moral principles). Thus, ethical decision-making helps both individuals and the organisations to navigate through complex situations and builds a foundation for integrity and trust. This process requires awareness, commitment, and competence that are both moral and effective to making good decisions.

Within the organisational domain, ethical decision-making occupies a vital role in determining whether an organisation succeeds or fails (Horton, 2020), this is because ethical decision-making plays a crucial in maintaining a positive reputation, which will lead to building trust with stakeholders and hence success in the long run (Jeffs, 2019). This positive reputation are on a consistent basis in order to attract customers, because organisations are obliged to customers by ensuring that its decisions are morally acceptable (Hunt, 2017). This is made possible by combing of basic business skills and integrity, and the act of striving to resolve issues by adopting morals principles as a frame of reference or guide. This also involves the evaluation of options, taking into cognizance moral ramifications of each, and making choices based on an individual values and standards. Nassar and Kamal (2021) argues that decision-making is the act of generating and executing ethical decisions, that tends to imbibe legal and professional standards and show regards for relevant stakeholders. Ethical decision-making serves as the framework for improving ensuring accountability, trust, and imbibing moral values to build a strong reputation for organisations (Sucipto et al., 2023).

Ethical decision-making are the basic steps in solving ethical dilemmas which has several models proposed by different scholars. But for the purpose of this study the researchers adopted the eight steps model developed by Linda K. Trevino and Katherine A. Nelson 1995. The model is influentially used in the business and management context as it provides a straight talk about how to manage a business by doing the right thing. These eight steps are; gathering of facts which is the most critical step, it simply means that decision making should be based on a proper and thorough understanding of the situation. Next is defining the ethical issues this means to clearly state the ethical problem that goes beyond finding solution but rather consulting with others to help clear the issue. Another is identifying the affected stakeholders, this is engaging all the stakeholders and letting them know who may or may not benefit from the decision. Thus, the decision makers look beyond their own interest and focus on stakeholders. This is followed by Identifying the consequences or outcomes, this step strictly adheres to the concept of consequentialism which is an ethical concept that judges the morality of action to be either right or wrong based on the outcomes it produces. Meaning an outcome of a decision is right if it produces a positive consequences and wrong if the outcome is negative. Identifying the obligations is another step that focuses on duties, principles, and rights by asking what duties I owe each stakeholder, what laws, rules, and professional ethics should I apply. This leads to the next step which is considering your character and integrity, this entails evaluating a potentials action not just based solely on the outcomes or consequences but also it reflection on you as a moral agent. Thinking creatively about potential actions, this step involves brainstorming the alternatives solution that might satiate the conflicting interests that are earlier identified. And the eighth step means, pause and check your moral intuition after a thorough rational analysis. This will enable the decision maker to re- examine the process in the rationally-driven decision feels deeply wrong.

Making decisions that are ethical is a multifaceted process that is analyzed by different scholars through various dimensions or models. These models often highlight the cognitive, psychological, and situational factors that influences how people recognizes ethical issues (situations that involves moral conflicts where principles of right and wrong are challenged, common ethical issues are fairness, honesty, deception, vitiation of rights as it pertains to areas like business) and how they respond to it. James Rest 1980 proposed “the four components model of decision making” which are; moral sensitivity/awareness, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Thomas

Jones 1991 also proposed "the issue-contingent model" building on Rest's dimensions, Jones introduced the concept of moral intensity, where he argued that the features of ethical issues itself influences how individuals will make decision, that is higher than moral intensity, the more likely the issue is being accepted as an ethical problem. And Lawrence Kohlberg 1958 proposed a concept that focuses on a person's level of reasoning. He stated that individual progresses through six stages which are compressed into three stages; pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality. However, for the purpose of this study the researchers adopted the ethical decision making model of Rest 1980, because it laid the basic foundation of understanding ethical issues. It noted that an ethical failure can occur if any of the four dimensions are missing. Rest's work in general and in particular became the focus of significant scholar research which has been tested by independent sources has tended to uphold the strength and validity of the test.

Moral sensitivity is the capacity to recognize an ethical issue and to understand how situations might affect other individuals. This entails the ability to be able to interpret a situation as possessing moral dimensions and to take into cognizance of the repercussion of the people involved. Moral sensitivity or awareness is the capacity to perceive and comprehend the moral issues inherent in complex situations, most commonly in professional life (Schmocker et al., 2024).

Moral judgment is the act of determining whether an action , person, or situation is right or wrong, just or unjust based on ethical principles, personal beliefs and social norms, it is the process of determining which course of action is morally right or acceptable. By applying moral principles of fairness, honesty, respect, and integrity to decide what needs to be done, this help shape how individuals and the organisation makes decision, interact, and build a culture of integrity. Moral judgment are evaluative judgments made by an individual as they response to violation of moral norm (Cannon et al., 2011), this is not just about a matter of rules and reasoning but a deeply tied emotional reactions with an organisation. Moral judgment is not primarily a product about reasoning but it's often based quick, intuitive, emotional reactions, and reasoning that are used afterwards to justify these initial intuitions. Moral judgment assist organisations by developing a foundation of trust, integrity, cooperation, the enhancement of reputation and public trust. It shapes organisational culture, and ultimately contributes to sustainability and success at the long-run. Moral character represents the stable traits and virtues a person possess, like compassion and honesty that are consistent set of ethical qualities that influences their ethical behaviours and decision making. It is not a singular action, rather a reliable pattern of an individual's behaviour across various situations over time. Moral character is constituted by a stable set of virtues that pertains to honest, compassion, and integrity that are acquired by an individual through practice that enables them to act rightly and reliably in different situations (Snow, 2022). Within the organisational cycles, moral character assists in building trust, improve ethical culture, and enhance the overall reputation and performance. This can be achieved as work members possess a strong moral character as they consistently make ethical decisions that will benefit the stakeholders. Moral motivation is that force that propels individuals to pursue what they believe to be right, even when doing so entails personal cost or interest. It is that self-determination for achieving an integrated motivation that aligns moral values with one's sense of self (Curren & Ryan, 2020).

Leadership and corporate governance are two crucial components that shapes organisational success and sustainable performance. Thus, the connection between leadership, corporate governance, and organisational performance is jointly reinforcing cycle where all three components greatly influences and relay on one another to achieve sustainable success. This is because it entails the establishment of an ethical cultural, setting a clear vision, aligning organisational objectives with stakeholder's interests, and the implementation of an effective practices to secure accountability, farness, and transparency. Hence, whether an organisation succeed or failure all depends on the choices or actions a leader makes, thus making ethical decisions based on moral principles and values that will translate to building a strong reputation and stakeholders trust at the long-run and securing performance becomes a necessary for organisational sustainability. Leadership role in organisational success and sustainability depends on how the leader provides a clear vision, effective communication and motivating employees to achieve the goals. Leadership is defined as the process by an individual exert influence over a group of individuals with the view to collectively achieve a shared objective (Kinicki, 2021). Leadership is not just about occupying a position of authority but having the capacity to inspire, influence, and motivate others to bring about beneficial change within an organisation (Folarori & Onifade, 2024). While corporate governance according to (Banda & Mwange, 2023) refers to a system of rules, practices, and procedures by which an organisation is directed and influenced. This means that organisations can use corporate governance in governing their activities by identifying who has the authority and accountability, and who makes decisions. Corporate governance ensures that enterprises has an appropriate decision making processes and control in place that can address or handle the interest of stakeholders, employees, customers, suppliers, the larger society. For Tapang et al. (2022), it is that system of rules, processes, and practices by which an enterprise is directed and influenced. They further explicated that it plays a vital role in ensuring accountability and protection of the interests of stakeholders as it pertains to emerging markets, accountability and financial performance. Corporate governance ensures accountability, fairness, and transparency in decision making process and the operations of an organisation (Tricker, 2015). This indicates that, the system is designed to create an ethical and effective framework for the operations of business enterprises by protecting the interest of all the stakeholders. An effective and visionary leadership that encourages adherence to a well-structured corporate governance framework creates a conducive atmosphere of transparency, accountability, and focus which is essential or maximizing and sustaining organisational performance. That is, leadership role in corporate governance for organisational performance is crucial because it penetrate the whole organisational structure. Especially as it establishes a culture of accountability, integrity, and trust, that enhance workers engagement and compliance to ethical standards, which directly mitigates operational risk, secure corporate image or reputation, promotes innovation, and ensures sustainable performance in the long-run.

The theory of Consequentialism is utilized as the theory to back up the concept of ethical decision making, the concept of Consequentialism was first coined by Gertrude Elizabeth Margret Anscombe in 1958, in her essay ''Modern Model Philosophy'' where she argued that the concept relies on problematic philosophical idea and that modern moral philosophy should return to a character- based in the understanding of ethics. This is because, leaders sometimes takes some courses of action or decisions without recourse to how people feel, for them it is the right course of action in as much as it will lead to success and sustenance of the organisation. The core principle of consequentialism is that the most ethical choice is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. Portmore (2019) mentioned that consequentialism is the relationship between morality and rationality, stating that what matters most is moving beyond simple utility to include other intrinsic goods in the assessment of outcome or consequences. The idea of consequentialism focuses on the consequences or outcomes of an action that the morality of a choice or course of action is determined by what it produces. For instance, a course of action that is described as being good if it correspond with a good outcomes, and bad if the consequences are bad. In essence consequentialism is an ethical theory that judges whether something is wrong or right based on its outcome or result or consequences. Another instance is when an organisation is confronted by ethical dilemmas, managers can evaluate the potential benefits and harms of each likely action for all affected parties. Hence, the decision or action that maximizes overall well-being and minimizes harm is considered the most ethical.

The application of the concept of consequentialism within the work environment entails that decisions, policies, and actions are judged as good or bad based on the outcome, most importantly as it produces the greatest good for the greater number of stakeholders. This implies that within the organizational context good is described as anything that maximizes profit and efficiency to improving employee's well-being and drives customer satisfaction.

Several scholars have empirically studied the phenomenon under investigation, Odunsi et al (2025) examined the relationship between ethical leadership and corporate governance and its impact on organisational performance in Nigerian telecommunications sector (MTN). The independent variable which is ethical leadership dimensions are fairness, integrity, transparency, and accountability. While the dependent variable is organisational performance, its measures are employee productivity, regulatory compliance, brand loyalty, and stakeholders trust. Corporate governance is used as a mediating variable. The methodology deployed is survey research design, multiple regression analysis is used to test the relationship and combined effect of the independent variables on organisational performance. The study concluded that ethical leadership provides a positive moral framework, while a positive governance structures embed the ethical principles into strategic decision making which in turn improve organisational performance.

Agbim (2018) investigated the interconnectedness between ethical leadership on corporate governance, performance and social responsibility in selected money deposit banks in Benue State, Nigeria. The study employed a quantitative research design (regression analysis) the methodology include descriptive and inferential statistics in testing the relationship and effect of the variables. That is the ethical leadership (independent variable) was discovered to have a significant and positive effect on corporate governance measures (accountability and transparency). Organisational performance was measured using financial and non-financial metrics. The study concluded that ethical conduct and leadership style of top management are panacea to drive corporate governance practices, which will improve overall organisational performance and social responsibility in the Nigerian banking sector.

Suggestion

The business environment is characterized by a high level of unethical practices that has led to the collapse of highly reputable organisation. For researchers that would want to further explore should consider area as ethical decision-making and employee productivity in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Ethical decision making and effective leadership are beneficial to organisations, individuals, and groups as it is fundamental to an effective corporate governance for securing organisational performance. Leadership role in making ethical decision through the strengthening of corporate governance contributes to organisational performance. Thus, eradicating unethical practices from the corporate landscape in Nigeria, requires a concerted effort to strengthen governance structures, ensuring accountability/ transparency, and a stiffer sanction for defaulters will help reduce unethical practices.

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