

Leadership Development Case Series

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The Role of Authentic Leadership: Top Ten Driving Forces for Achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 in Developing Countries



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Abstract

National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) growth indicators (1990-2021) show that the achievement of SDG 6 is possible in Uganda. This article expounds on antecedents of authentic leadership and how its application may have positive effects on achievement of SDG 6. We propose ten driving forces based on NWSC experiences and practice. We find that, with well-focused water for all strategic agenda, well thought out priorities, proper resource planning and correct leadership mindset, the achievement of SDG 6 by NWSC is possible. Local context and self-help leadership ethic will be key in promulgating SDG 6 initiatives. Applying the concept of authentic leadership is a promising primer in designing programs and actions for achievement of SDG 6.

1. Introduction

National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) is a public parastatal that is 100 percent owned by the Government of Uganda, having been formed by decree in 1972. Its legislative framework was revised and strengthened in 1995. Overtime, the NWSC has registered significant growth. Figure 1 below shows some growth indicators. More specifically, between 1990 and 2021, the

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urban water coverage (with urban boundaries) has increased from 18 percent to 85 percent; the urban population served with water has increased from 500,000 people to 15million people. This is because the water pipe network length has increased from 300Kms to 20,000Kms while the number of water connections has increased

from 20,000 to 700,000 connections.

We now examine the role of authentic leadership and driving factors for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, based on NWSC growth experiences and practice.

2. Role of Authentic Leadership

In Harvard Business Review (HBR) 10 must reads on leadership (2011), the article by Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean and Diana Mayer on **Discovering your Authentic Leadership**, points out that authentic leadership is concerned with demonstrating passion for purpose, practicing values consistently, and leading

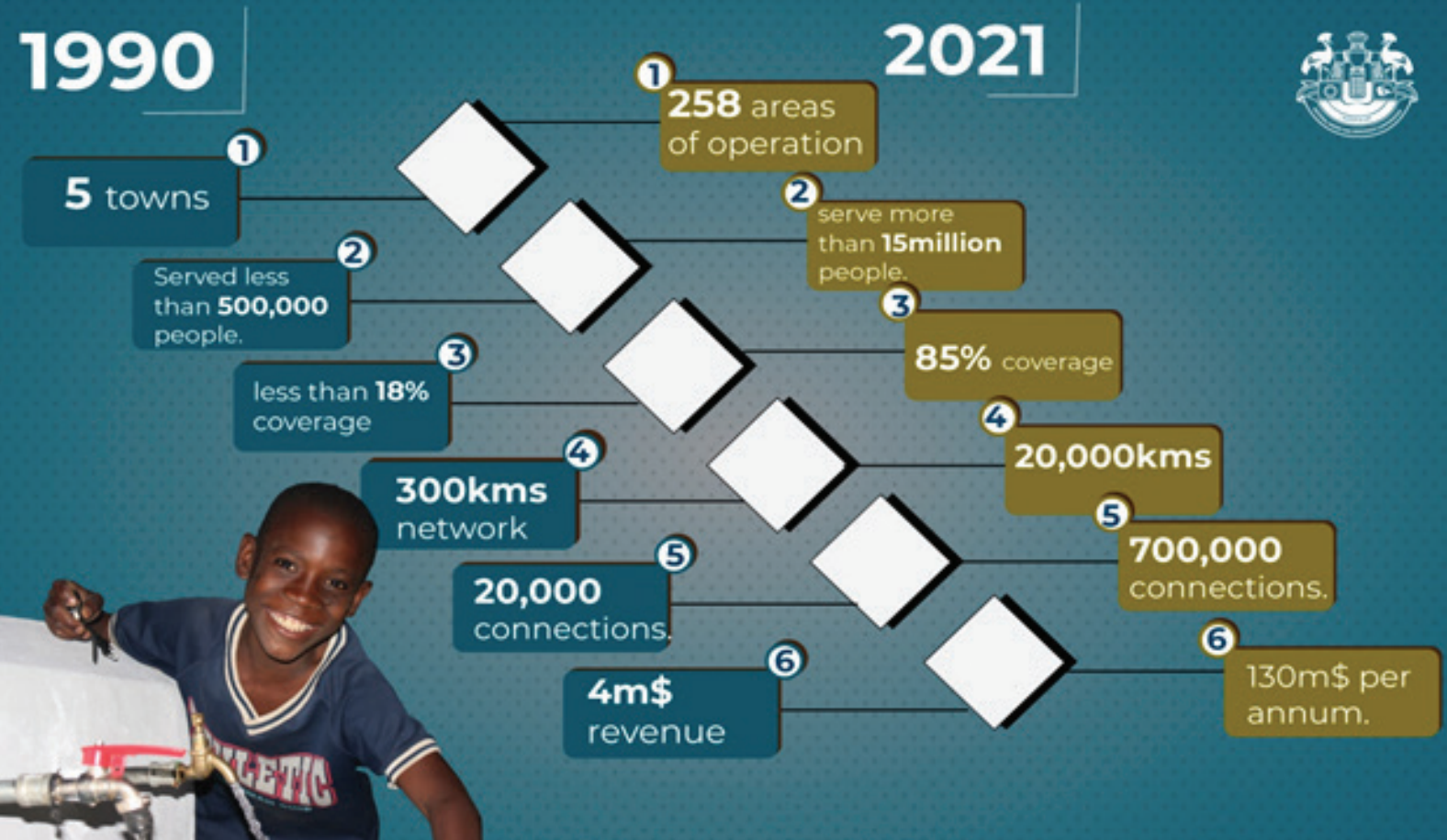


Figure 1: NWSC Growth Indicators (1990-2021)

with hearts as well as heads. Authentic leadership helps to establish long-term, meaningful relationships and creates self-determination to achieve results. It also helps leaders to know who they are and what they stand for. The authors pinpoint a number of perspectives about how people become authentic leaders. They frame their life stories in ways that allow them to see themselves not as passive observers of their lives but rather as individuals who can develop self-awareness from their experiences. They act on that awareness by practicing their values and principles, sometimes at substantial risk to themselves. They balance their motivations so that they are driven by these inner values as much as by a desire for external rewards or recognition. Authentic leaders also keep a strong support team around them, ensuring that they live integrated, grounded lives. Clearly for this understanding of authentic leadership, we discern the following corresponding perspectives that may be key to driving entities to achieve SDG 6:

Learning from institutional memory and life story: organizations learn a lot from what has happened in the organization in the past – how processes and structures have been improved progressively and what next needs to be done. Sometimes there has been successes and sometimes failures/challenges. The way these incidences were managed creates a scene for better ideas to handle reoccurrences. Such experiences provide sources of inspiration and enable leaders to understand the deeper purpose of their job placement. Where transformative changes happened in the past, designing high successor plans and their replication becomes easier.

Creating a strong culture of knowing authentic self: if organizations have staff that resent criticisms, feedback and personal evaluation, sustaining high performance becomes problematic. at that same time, if an

organization prefers closed-door policy: hardship in information disclosure and overly defending wrong behavior, the spaces for continuous improvements narrow. Organizations must lay a strong foundation of self-respect and accountability, take criticism and not deny it. A leadership logic that abhors failures and disappointments remains performance short-sighted and limits scope for innovation and creativity.

Inculcating a high spirit of practicing values and principles: most organizations have a raft of values outlined in their strategic plans. The values that pass the test of authentic leadership derive from institutional beliefs and convictions but the robustness of those values can only be seen when the system is faced with pressure and extreme disruptions. It is easy to live by and talk about institutional values but when extreme events surface, you learn what is important, what you are prepared to sacrifice and what trade-offs you are willing to make.

Building internal and external motivations: successful leaders are those that utilize internal and external interdependencies and emotions. Leaders cannot succeed on their own: they need support, advice, relationships and cohesion from inside and outside the organization. Otherwise, it is easy to be distracted. Authentic leaders build strong networks and collaborative arrangements inside the organization to give them advice, support, advocacy and protection, based on the prevailing circumstances. Mentoring and coaching are also important in creating learning opportunities and self-confidence of leaders. It is also important to note that be true to yourself: letting someone know what should be known and not what they want to know, creates better learning opportunities.

Building a strong culture of work-life balance:

Productive organizations will continue to leverage a lot from employees who integrate their life by staying grounded. Authentic leaders put emphasis on win-win approaches for their employees: finding innovative ways of making sure organizations win and employees win. This interdependence is important. Employees must be encouraged to have lasting relationships, networks, stable families, social capital, health living and personal development. Personal development is usually the employee's responsibility but if not tactfully demanded, absence of it can be a source of grievances and sub-optimal productivity in the organization. Thus, authentic leadership may require directing efforts to life assurance schemes for employees and strong advocacy and education to ensure maximum uptake.

Empowering people to lead: the best way of simplifying leadership is to delegate and empower people to lead. One way is to allow people to plan and take risks: when they fail, you provide support and assurance and when they succeed, you encourage them to celebrate their success and aim at the next practice. Everything, of course, remain pivoted to the overall strategy. Authentic leadership requires that there is a system of continuous re-engineering and reset, always looking for new ways of improving production technologies and efficiencies.

3. Ten Driving Forces for Achieving SDG 6:

Applying Aspects of Authentic Leadership. The whole world is awash with the need to achieve SDGs by 2030. Specifically, SDG 6 is about ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. In this article, we outline ten (10) driving forces, based on experience at National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), regarding achievement of SDG 6.

i. Strategic Clarity and Focus: the achievement of SDG 6 will depend on strategic clarity and focus by implementing entities. It is important that an institutional mindset of water and sanitation for all is well entrenched. This is because without this alignment, there will be mixed responses to resource utilization. At NWSC, we have learned that resources tend to have competing pressures and without clarity and strategic focus, there will be many incidences of distractions. If you don't have a good grasp of important things, everything will appear important. For example, if you are clear with a water and sanitation for all agenda (which is the case at NWSC), pressures from suppliers of other inputs like prepaid meters, remote sensing equipment, automatic pumping systems etc. which do not directly impact water for all strategy, can easily be managed. Instead, inputs like supply pipe materials, low-cost but quality pumping systems, expansion of water production systems etc, which directly serves an additional customer become more relevant. The achievement of SDG 6 will require implementing entities to contextualize underlying strategies, know the high impactful inputs rather than being diverted by ideas that everyone else is floating around with a purpose of selling their products. Having a strong conviction of what works and what is needed, based on local context, rather than simply copying solutions (which most times are inappropriate) is key.

ii. Positive Mindset that it is Achievable: there is no way an entity can mobilize and implement something it cannot foresee and believe that it is achievable. At NWSC, the water utilisation effort that has increased the jurisdictional coverage from twenty-three (23) urban centers to two hundred fifty-eight (258) in a space of eight years (2013-2021) has succeeded because of a strong positive mindset. This increased the number of urban population served with safe piped water services from about four (4) million to fifteen (15) million. This was at backdrop of a water tariff that only covers recurrent costs and some capital expenses. The positive mindset, right from top leadership to shop floor employees, has helped to buttress a number of underpinning innovations and inputs.

iii. Innovative financing options: the first call on financing of infrastructure for water and sanitation (WATSAN) by implementing entities is from bilateral and multilateral financing institutions. Not much thinking is put on exploring low investment cost

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possibilities from this line of financing option. For instance, it is possible to optimize investment costs through selection of either budget support or project financing options, based on local country contexts, development level of local contracting arrangements and flexibility afforded by national procurement regime versus donor-driven procurement guidelines. But of course, if you are not sure of what you want as an entity, someone else will determine

your priorities and course of action. Moreover, there are many other financing options, including leveraging investment finance from cost efficiency gains. At NWSC, despite the takeover of many unviable urban water systems, the operating surplus (before depreciation) has increased (2013-2021) from about USD 10million per annum to USD 30million per annum. Consequently, the corporation has been able to finance significant low-medium size capital investments using its own internally generated resources, with minor adjustments in the water tariff.



There are also other sources of financing that can be mapped out by using experienced investment finance experts and aligning their proposals with political contexts



and local enabling conditions for WATSAN infrastructure. For example, at NWSC, in 2019, we obtained USD 12million from local banks on the basis of a strong corporate financial performance. The cost of money, much as it appeared higher than concessionary loans from bilateral and multinational financial markets, was proved to be ultimately lower due to reduced transaction costs, flexibility in acquisition and application of innovative contracting arrangements and easier scaling up possibilities.

iv. Aligning Political Economy of WATSAN Projects:

understanding political dynamics, expectations at play and alignment with idiosyncrasies of WATSAN strategy is key. The approach to implementation of the strategy must be sensitive to political economy and country context. For example, if tariff adjustments are, historically, politically sensitive, a gradualistic approach to tariff adjustments that don't cause economic shocks to people may be preferred. If infrastructure investments are immediately needed, efforts that seek capital from financial markets can be explored with a hope of repayment when economic balance of revenues has been achieved. In tandem, maintaining a certain threshold of managerial efficiencies is key. If there is significant gap between the understanding and appreciation of the strategy between the political segment and the implementing entity, targeted communication and engagement is important. In the end, the best solace for politicians and other policy makers is predictable services for their followership (citizens). A leadership of the entity that is heavily service and action-oriented is the best comfort.

v. Focus on operating efficiency gains to leverage investment financing:

we have already underscored this issue. There is a lot of infrastructure investment work that can be carried out using resources that are internally generated by the WATSAN entity without recourse to huge tariff adjustments. The tariff must, however, be at a level sufficient enough to cover all operating costs (including depreciation), financing costs and taxes and also cover small-medium size investments. The best indicator of this level of operation is how the revenue surplus trends over time. In order to maintain steady progress of this indicator, entities must focus on innovative cost containment measures and strategically align WATSAN investments. In addition, attention should be put in maximizing revenue collection efficiencies (including payments from Government ministries and departments) and ensuring that the tariff is not eroded by external economic factors like inflation, foreign exchange rates and power costs. At NWSC, over the last 20 years, the real value of the tariff has been protected against external factors through a tariff indexation instrument approved by Government.

vi. Mobilizing Smart Partnerships: partnerships are excellent arrangements where parties, known as collaborating partners, agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests. The WATSAN business partners may be financial market institutions, individuals, industrialists, manufacturers, contractors, consultants,



suppliers of goods and services, schools, environmental agencies, governments or combinations. Organizations may partner to increase the likelihood of each achieving their strategy and to increase their penetration. Partnerships need to foster win-win solutions and economic balance. The risk to meaningful partnerships is informational and critical thinking asymmetries. Partnerships built on unbalanced understanding of underpinning objectives, possibly resulting from lax approach of one party, are not sustainable in the long run. Experience has shown that if an institution just enters a partnership without aligning partnership objectives to its core mission and strategy, external scrutiny and audit can destabilize associated intents. Doing things for the sake of doing them or because others have done them somewhere, is the biggest threat of organizational effectiveness. At NWSC, partnerships with regional water associations like African Water Association (AfWA) and International Water Association (IWA) has helped to boost performance through benchmarking, knowledge sharing and exposure to new technologies and inputs. Partnerships with learning institutions like Makerere University, Uganda; IHE-Delft, Netherlands; WEDEC of Loughborough University, UK and Public Utilities Research Centre (PURC) of University of Florida, USA, among others, has helped to enhance capacity building of NWSC staff.

vii. Competence-based Human Resource (HR) Capacity Building: SDG 6 will be achieved if implementing agencies invest in capacity building of their staff in requisite practical skills and competences. There has been a tendency to do more of talking under

the guise of advocacy and sensitization about SDGs. It is time to do less of talking and more of action. As already pointed out above, much as resourcing infrastructure is key, there is a lot that can be achieved through innovation and creative leadership. Managers and staff that have strong practical skills and competences will find it easier to reach the frontiers of policy design and advocacy, action and performance accountability. Emphasis on the extent to what one can use knowledge (from education) for action rather than mere rhetoric of amassing qualifications for the sake of it, will accelerate SDG achievement. Specifically, implementing entities will need a leadership logic that creates great organizations by promoting a high culture of discipline and high entrepreneurship ethic. At the core of all this will be managers and staff with high skills and competences.

viii. Adapting Appropriate Technologies: the achievement of SDG 6 will depend on how entities adopt appropriate rather than merely copying technology. Technology must respond to gaps identified as a result of implementing certain performance improvement strategies. There are many service providers of technology (including ICT solutions) in the WATSAN sector. This is a good trend. But technology should be selected following the need to accelerate achievement of priority strategic objectives. Process value addition in terms of quality enhancement, cost and time savings must be well assessed. WATSAN entities must avoid falling into the usual trap: let us do it (buy it) because so and so has it, without due regard to operational need and local context. At NWSC, the water for all strategy dictates

resource allocation and technology choice. There is emphasis on inhouse applications development designs. Consequently, a number of solutions have been internally created, including systems for billing, e-banking, e-procurement, e-inventory, e-payroll, e-staff leave management and e-water quality management. These systems have created increased operating efficiencies at much less input cost. NWSC has also created its own salt electrolysis technology, prepaid meter IT/electronic circuit system and task planning.

ix. Equitable Investment in Ecosystem

Infrastructure: there is no way WATSAN entities will achieve SDG 6 without taking into consideration a community or group of living organisms that live and interact with each other in specific environments. The centrality of ecosystem infrastructure management lies in the conservation of forests, swamps, wetlands and shrubs. Increasingly, WATSAN entities must get deeply involved in integrated water resources management and climate change mitigation. This is the only sure way of ensuring continuous availability of raw water sources that are the backbone of WATSAN services provision. Relatedly, embracing circular economy principles, including recycling technologies is paramount. At NWSC, deliberate efforts are made to include environmental conservation activities in annual budgets and subsequent implementation through collaboration with targeted communities of practice like schools and churches. Large project works also must incorporate a significant environment and social safeguards component. The mistake WATSAN entities do is to allow to operate in silos: leaving environmental protection issues to environment management agencies. A framework of collaboration has to be evolved at a strategic and policy level.

x. Continuous Learning Orientation: WATSAN entities that are central to achievement of SDG 6 must keep themselves fit for purpose through purposeful continuous learning strategies. In this case, adaptive leadership will continue to play a role: the mindset of yearning for next better practices. New managerial approaches, especially from organizations that have moved from good to great, with a high entrepreneurship ethic, continue to emerge. Leaders that will continue to embrace challenges and failures and using them as opportunities to improve the running of their organizations will successfully navigate complex operating contexts that continue to surface. All this requires adaptive and continuous learning institutional culture. Leaders that stay with yesterday's knowledge will continue to lead their organizations using yesterday's perspectives and, most probably, cause stagnation and/or regression. At NWSC, there is a strong learning and research culture to try to surface new ideas and technologies. That is why managers at NWSC, hardly, get comfort in what they are doing and achieving. New performance improvement programmes characterize operations management at NWSC. The overarching policy document is the three-year corporate plan and the Government of Uganda performance contract that are periodically rolled.



4. Conclusion

Clearly, with well-focused water for all strategic agenda, well thought out priorities, proper resource planning and correct leadership mindset, the achievement of SDG 6 by NWSC is possible. It will require balancing infrastructure and operating efficiency. Sustainability of underpinning activities will also be enhanced by integrated water resources management. Local context and self-help leadership ethic will be key in promulgating SDG 6 initiatives. Believing and having a positive attitude that SDG 6 is achievable underpins policy initiatives and resilience during specific implementation agenda. Applying the concept of authentic leadership is a promising primer in designing programs and actions for achievement of SDG 6.



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