

# STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: THE MISSING LINK IN NIGERIA'S QUEST FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

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There is hardly any conversation about Nigeria's development in which the question of leadership does not arise. In homes, universities, professional circles, markets, workplaces and public forums, Nigerians repeatedly express a desire for good leadership. We ask for strong leaders. We demand competent leaders. We desire visionary leaders who can confront difficult problems and move the country towards prosperity.

These expectations are understandable. Leadership matters profoundly in the life of every nation. Yet there is a more fundamental question that we must begin to ask: **What exactly do we mean when we demand good leadership?**

Is a strong leader necessarily a good leader? Is a popular leader necessarily an effective leader? Is winning an election sufficient evidence that an individual possesses the capacity to govern? More importantly, can a person have admirable leadership qualities and still lack the strategic capacity required to transform a country?

These questions take us to the heart of an important distinction between **leadership and strategic leadership**.

Leadership gives direction. Strategic leadership provides direction with purpose, method, foresight and a clearly conceived pathway towards an intended result.

This distinction matters enormously for Nigeria.

## **Beyond the Search for a Strong Leader**

For many years, national discussions have concentrated heavily on the search for a "strong leader". There is often an assumption that what Nigeria requires is an individual sufficiently powerful, courageous or determined to confront the country's challenges.

Strength is undoubtedly an important leadership quality. But strength by itself does not guarantee successful governance.

A leader may be powerful without being strategic. A leader may be charismatic without understanding the complexities of public administration. A leader may command loyalty without possessing the institutional capacity necessary to translate promises into sustainable outcomes.

Proper leadership requires more than one desirable attribute.

It involves the convergence of **good leadership, strong leadership and winning leadership**.

A good leader brings integrity, responsibility and concern for the collective interest. A strong leader possesses the courage and authority to take difficult decisions and remain committed to legitimate objectives. A winning leader understands how to mobilise people and resources towards results.

When these qualities are combined with strategic thinking, the possibility of **proper leadership** begins to emerge.

The strategic leader goes even further. Such a leader does not merely know what must be achieved. He or she understands **how it can be achieved, with whom, through which institutions, with what resources, within what timeframe and against which possible obstacles**.

That is the difference between aspiration and strategy.

Nigeria has never lacked aspirations. What has frequently been difficult is converting national aspirations into consistent, coordinated and sustainable outcomes.

## **What Makes Leadership Strategic?**

Strategic leadership begins with an understanding that leadership is not merely about occupying an office. It is about intentionally moving an organisation, institution or nation from its current condition towards a desired future.

A strategic leader must therefore answer several fundamental questions:

Where are we today?

Where do we intend to be?

What obstacles stand between our present condition and our desired future?

What opportunities exist within our environment?

What resources and capabilities are available?

Who must participate in achieving the objective?

What strategy offers the most effective route?

And how will we know that progress is actually being made?

These may appear to be straightforward questions, but they represent the foundations of serious governance.

A leader who cannot define the present condition cannot properly determine the destination. A leader who does not understand the environment cannot adequately anticipate threats or recognise opportunities. A leader without measurable priorities may mistake activity for achievement.

Strategic leadership therefore requires **foresight, diagnosis, prioritisation, coordination, implementation and evaluation.**

It demands the capacity to see beyond immediate applause and temporary political advantage.

The strategic leader must constantly think about consequences.

What happens after this policy is introduced?

What happens five years from now?

Can the programme survive beyond the present administration?

Do the institutions responsible for implementation possess the required capabilities?

What unintended consequences may arise?

What should be done if circumstances change?

These are strategic questions. And governance becomes considerably stronger when leadership is organised around them.

## **Nigeria Does Not Simply Have a Leadership Problem**

We frequently hear the statement that "Nigeria lacks leadership."

Perhaps the statement requires reconsideration.

Nigeria certainly has leaders. We have leaders in politics, government, business, academia, traditional institutions, professional associations, religious organisations, communities and civil society.

The more fundamental question is whether enough of those entrusted with responsibility possess **strategic leadership capability.**

There is an important difference.

Anyone may become a leader through election, appointment, promotion, inheritance, seniority, influence or circumstance. None of these routes automatically produces a strategic leader.

Strategic leadership must be cultivated.

It requires knowledge.

It requires discipline.

It requires the capacity to think critically.

It requires understanding institutions.

It requires competence in managing people and resources.

It requires the ability to recognise the relationship between today's decisions and tomorrow's consequences.

Most importantly, it requires understanding that leadership is not primarily about the individual who occupies the highest office.

Leadership is a system.

## **A Leader Is Only as Strategic as the Team Around Him**

One of the mistakes societies sometimes make is to concentrate entirely on one individual.

We examine the President, Governor, Minister, Chief Executive, Chairman or Director and expect that individual alone to produce transformation.

But no serious institution and certainly no modern nation is governed by one person.

Behind every leader is a network of advisers, administrators, technical experts, ministers, commissioners, civil servants, political associates, institutional heads and other actors who influence both decisions and implementation.

Consequently, when evaluating leadership, we must look beyond the principal officeholder.

We must examine the **composition of the leadership system**.

Who advises the leader?

On what basis are appointments made?

Are competent people placed in positions where their capabilities can produce results?

Can advisers tell the leader an uncomfortable truth?

Are decisions informed by evidence?

Do institutions retain professional independence?

Is there continuity between policy formulation and implementation?

A strategic leader deliberately builds a strategic team.

The quality of those surrounding a leader therefore matters almost as much as the quality of the leader.

If a visionary leader surrounds himself with individuals who lack competence, integrity or strategic understanding, the quality of governance will eventually reflect those deficiencies.

Conversely, an effective leadership team can strengthen decision making, identify errors early, broaden perspectives and improve implementation.

Strategic leadership is therefore not a solo performance. It is the deliberate coordination of capable people towards a clearly defined purpose.

## **We Must Also Examine How Leadership Emerges**

Another issue deserves attention.

When assessing leadership, it is not enough to ask who eventually occupies power. We should also understand **how leadership emerges and the conditions surrounding the acquisition of authority**.

The path through which people attain leadership can influence their priorities, obligations and approach to governance.

A leader who emerges within a system driven mainly by patronage may enter office carrying very different obligations from one whose emergence depends substantially on competence, ideas, performance and institutional accountability.

This is why governance cannot be separated from the structures through which leaders are selected, prepared, supported and held accountable.

Proper governance concerns not simply the individual at the top but the institutions, processes, norms and relationships through which authority is exercised.

Leadership and governance must therefore work together.

Strong leadership without proper governance can become arbitrary.

Good governance without capable leadership can become administratively stagnant.

Strategy provides the bridge between the two.

# Growth Is Not a Strategy

Nigerians rightly desire growth.

We want better employment opportunities. We want functioning infrastructure. We want improved education. We want effective healthcare. We want stronger security. We want productive industries, sustainable agriculture and an economy capable of creating opportunities for its citizens.

However, the desire for growth is not itself a strategy.

Saying that Nigeria must grow does not explain how growth will occur.

Promising millions of jobs is not the same as establishing a credible mechanism through which productive employment will be created.

Announcing infrastructure projects is different from building the institutional capability to deliver, maintain and sustainably finance those projects.

Strategic leadership converts broad ambitions into **clear objectives, realistic priorities, coordinated actions and measurable results.**

It asks what sectors offer the greatest opportunities.

It identifies the capabilities required.

It recognises resource limitations.

It establishes priorities rather than attempting everything simultaneously.

It understands sequencing.

Some reforms must precede others. Some institutions must first be strengthened before additional responsibilities are assigned to them. Some policies require complementary investments to succeed.

Strategy is therefore fundamentally about making choices.

A government that has one hundred priorities effectively has no priority.

Strategic leadership identifies what matters most, determines what can realistically be achieved and mobilises resources accordingly.

## **Proper Governance Must Create an Atmosphere for Leadership to Succeed**

Even the most competent leader cannot sustainably transform a country through personal capacity alone.

Institutions matter.

Proper governance requires an environment in which good leadership can flourish and poor leadership can be constrained.

This involves credible institutions, accountability, transparency, professional public administration, respect for rules, responsible management of resources, continuity of policy and mechanisms through which performance can be evaluated.

A country becomes vulnerable when everything depends upon the personality of whoever happens to occupy office.

A properly governed society builds institutions capable of functioning regardless of personalities.

This does not reduce the importance of leadership. Rather, it makes leadership more productive and sustainable.

The strategic leader therefore understands that one of his greatest responsibilities is institution building.

Leadership should not merely produce achievements that disappear when the leader leaves office. It should create systems capable of sustaining progress.

That is one of the clearest distinctions between ordinary leadership and strategic leadership.

## **Governance Is Too Important to Be Treated as an All Comers Affair**

There is an important philosophy underlying the work of the Academy for Governance: governance should be approached as an area requiring knowledge, competence and preparation.

Society would hardly permit someone without appropriate preparation to practise medicine simply because the person is popular. We would not ordinarily hand over a complex engineering project to someone merely because the person possesses good intentions.

Yet governance is responsible for decisions affecting millions of people, billions of naira in public resources, national institutions, economic systems, security structures and the future direction of society.

Why then should governance be treated as though competence were optional?

The professionalisation of governance does not suggest that leadership should be restricted to a particular academic qualification. Rather, it recognises that people entrusted with public responsibility should understand the principles, institutions, strategies and obligations involved in governing effectively.

Governance should therefore involve deliberate knowledge acquisition, knowledge development and, critically, **knowledge deployment**.

Knowing is not enough.

The strategic leader must be able to apply knowledge.

This is where strategic management becomes important. Strategy without execution remains an idea. Vision without implementation remains an aspiration. Policy without institutional capability remains a document.

The true test of strategic leadership is therefore the ability to move from thought to action and from action to measurable public value.

## **Character, Competence and Capability**

Nigeria's future leadership conversation should increasingly revolve around three interconnected qualities: **character, competence and capability**.

Character asks whether a leader possesses integrity, responsibility and commitment to the public interest.

Competence asks whether the leader possesses the knowledge and skills necessary to perform effectively.

Capability goes further. It concerns whether competence is combined with the appropriate attitude, judgement, resources and institutional support necessary to produce results.

A person may know what to do but lack the discipline to do it.

Another may have admirable intentions but lack technical understanding.

A third may possess knowledge and good intentions but be incapable of organising the people and institutions necessary for implementation.

Strategic leadership brings these dimensions together.

## **The Strategic Leader Thinks Beyond Tenure**

Perhaps one of the greatest tests of strategic leadership is the capacity to think beyond the period of one's authority.

Ordinary political thinking may ask: *What can I accomplish before the next election?*

Strategic leadership asks: *What system can we build today that will continue producing value twenty years from now?*

This is particularly important for national development.

Education reforms require continuity.

Infrastructure requires maintenance.

Economic transformation requires sustained policy coordination.

Institutional reform requires patience.

Human capital development may take decades before its full benefits become visible.

A country cannot therefore achieve long term transformation if every leadership transition produces an entirely new direction.

Strategic leadership creates continuity without preventing innovation.

It establishes national priorities sufficiently durable to survive changes in personalities while allowing succeeding leaders to improve upon existing foundations.

## **From Leadership Personalities to Leadership Systems**

Nigeria must gradually move away from a culture in which national expectations are concentrated almost exclusively on the emergence of an extraordinary individual.

No individual, however exceptional, can substitute for functioning institutions.

The more sustainable objective is to create a leadership ecosystem capable of repeatedly producing competent people and placing them within institutions that reward performance, integrity and strategic thinking.

This is why leadership education and governance education are important.

Future ministers should understand strategic management.

Public administrators should understand implementation.

Political leaders should understand institutions.

Executives should understand accountability.

Those responsible for national development should understand how objectives, resources, people and institutions must be aligned.

We must consciously develop leaders who do not merely ask, "**What position do I occupy?**"

They must ask, "**What objective are we trying to achieve, what strategy will take us there, and what institutional capacity must we build to sustain the outcome?**"

That is the mindset of strategic leadership.

## **The Leadership Nigeria Needs**

Nigeria does not need strength without direction.

It does not need vision without implementation.

It does not need popularity without competence.

It does not need ambition without institutions.

And it certainly does not need leadership that begins and ends with occupying public office.

The country requires leaders capable of understanding complexity, anticipating change, choosing priorities, mobilising capable people, protecting institutions, using evidence, managing resources responsibly and maintaining focus on clearly defined national objectives.

Such leaders must be prepared to learn before leading and continue learning while leading.

They must recognise that public authority is not simply an opportunity to exercise power but a responsibility to create value for society.

Nigeria's leadership question should therefore evolve.

Instead of asking only:

**Who is strong enough to lead us?**

We should also ask:

**Who understands where we need to go?**

**Who has a credible strategy for getting there?**

**Who possesses the competence and character to implement that strategy?**

**Who can assemble the right people?**

**Who can strengthen institutions rather than weaken them?**

**Who can produce outcomes capable of surviving beyond his or her tenure?**

These are the questions that take us from ordinary leadership to strategic leadership.

And ultimately, that is the leadership conversation Nigeria must have.

We should no longer be satisfied merely because someone is a leader.

We should be interested in whether that person understands the **strategy of leadership, the responsibility of governance and the discipline of implementation.**

For Nigeria's challenge is not merely that we need leaders.

**Nigeria needs strategic leaders.**

Leaders who understand that development must be designed.

Leaders who understand that institutions must be strengthened.

Leaders who understand that people must be strategically deployed.

Leaders who understand that resources must be aligned with priorities.

Leaders who understand that today's decisions shape tomorrow's nation.

And leaders who recognise that the ultimate measure of leadership is not the authority they possessed while in office, but the sustainable progress their leadership made possible.

**That is proper leadership.**

**That is strategic leadership.**

**And that is the pathway towards proper governance and sustainable national development.**