The role of leadership in driving employee engagement through organizational change: A case study of access bank and their acquisition over atlas mara bank Zambia limited

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ABSTRACT

In times of change, such as mergers and acquisitions, employee engagement is one critical factor for organizational success; uncertainty and resistance can drag down morale and productivity levels. The study sought to assess the role of leadership in driving employee engagement in a merger and acquisition deal with reference to Access Bank Zambia Limited's acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank Zambia Limited. The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to achieve three aims: identifying leadership strategies used, assessing their impact on employee engagement, and examining the role of communication in influencing engagement. The study was guided by transformational leadership theory and employee engagement theory to assess the role of leadership in driving employee engagement through organizational change during Access Bank's acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank. The study's target population was 240, from which a sample of 150 respondents was calculated using Slovin's formula. The information was gathered via structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and 145 respondents (employees and leaders of each bank) between the two banks returned the questionnaires, representing a response rate of 96.6%. For quantitative data, descriptive statistics and regression analysis were performed, and thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. Results showed that Access Bank employed directive, participative, and contingency leadership approaches during the acquisition phase. By looking at the predictive significance of leadership strategy, it was established that it does not have a significant statistical impact on employee engagement, but rather effective communication and organizational support played major roles in achieving engagement. Transparent communication, involving people in the decision-making process, and continuous support substantially boosted morale, trust, and resilience. In essence, the study shows that understanding the company situation and how to communicate it is a leadership must-have, as well as helping employees cope after acquisitions. The study recommends enhancing communication strategies, fostering participatory leadership, and establishing more robust transition support systems. This study adds to the literature on leadership during organizational change and employee engagement in two ways based on the Zambian banking sector. According to the study findings, some of the recommendations were that Access Bank should enhance communication strategies and strengthen feedback mechanisms to foster a more engaged workforce during organizational changes. Additionally, the organization should provide comprehensive support, develop leadership capabilities, cultivate an inclusive culture, and implement a data-driven approach to effectively manage the acquisition process.

Keywords: Acquisitions, Attitude Towards Change, Communication Effectiveness, Corporate Banking Sector, Employees, Leadership Strategies, Organizational Market Change

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic business environment, organizational change is a prevalent reality that significantly impacts employee engagement and overall performance. Transitions driven by technological advancements, intensified market competition, regulatory reforms, and strategic realignments necessitate effective leadership to guide organizations through periods of uncertainty, ensuring that employees remain motivated and aligned with organizational objectives. Effective leadership shapes employees' perceptions of change and directly influences their attitudes toward their work (Mansaray, 2019). Leaders who communicate a clear vision and foster inclusivity create a sense of stability and trust, which is crucial for sustaining engagement during transitions (Hussain et al., 2018).

The acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank Zambia Limited by Access Bank was a strategic move aimed at enhancing Access Bank's presence in the Southern African market. Finalized in 2024, this acquisition was part of Access Bank's broader strategy to expand its footprint across Africa. Atlas Mara, established in 2013, had positioned itself as a key player in improving financial inclusion across the region but faced challenges, including regulatory pressures and the need for capital infusion, prompting the acquisition. This transition not only represented a growth opportunity for Access Bank but also highlighted the importance of leadership in fostering employee engagement during significant organizational change. Mergers and acquisitions (M&As) often generate uncertainty and resistance among employees, which can undermine morale and productivity. Thus, effective leadership becomes critical in mitigating these challenges by fostering a supportive environment.

Previous studies suggest that transformational leadership strategies, characterized by inspiration, empathy, and effective communication, play a vital role in maintaining employee engagement during organizational change (Islam et al., 2021). By involving employees in the change process and addressing their concerns, leaders can cultivate a culture of collaboration and commitment, enhancing organizational performance during M&As (Rizka et al., 2022). The financial sustainability of banks during M&A processes is closely linked to how leadership manages employee engagement (Mpundu & Kachamba, 2024).

Despite the growing literature on leadership and employee engagement during organizational change, Mpundu and Kachamba (2024) argue that there is a notable research gap in the Zambian banking sector. Most existing studies focus on developed economies, leaving limited empirical evidence on how leadership practices influence employee engagement during M&As in developing countries. The unique cultural and regulatory dynamics within Zambia present distinct challenges that are underexplored in academic discourse.

The acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank by Access Bank Zambia offers valuable insights into how leadership shapes employee engagement during significant organizational transformations. This study examines the leadership strategies employed by Access Bank to sustain employee engagement during the acquisition process, focusing on transparent communication, organizational support, and inclusive decision-making. By exploring these dimensions, the study aims to contribute context-specific insights into effective leadership during mergers and acquisitions within the Zambian banking sector, arguing that effective leadership, characterized by transparent communication and consistent support, plays a pivotal role in sustaining employee engagement and driving organizational performance during transitions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In an ideal organizational environment, effective leadership during significant changes, such as mergers and acquisitions, is crucial for fostering high levels of employee engagement, motivation, and commitment. Leaders who communicate transparently, provide consistent support, and involve employees in decision-making processes create a culture of trust and inclusivity, essential for navigating the complexities of organizational transitions. However, the acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank by Access Bank Zambia Limited has highlighted significant challenges in maintaining employee engagement. Reports from Access Bank's HR department indicate that many employees have expressed feelings of uncertainty, disengagement, and resistance to change, revealing a disconnect between leadership strategies and employee expectations. For instance, a recent internal survey conducted among staff revealed that approximately 70% of employees experienced anxiety about their roles during the acquisition process, which correlates with findings from Siasulingana (2024) and Shawa (2022) regarding the impact of organizational changes on employee morale and productivity.

These challenges adversely affect employee morale, engagement, and overall organizational performance. High levels of disengagement can lead to increased turnover rates, reduced productivity, and a weakened organizational culture, undermining the success of the acquisition. According to industry reports, disengagement rates in the Zambian banking sector can rise by up to 30% during mergers and acquisitions (Mpundu & Kachamba, 2024; Islam et al., 2021). Such statistics underscore the urgent need for effective leadership strategies tailored to the Zambian context to mitigate these issues.

Despite the recognized influence of leadership on employee engagement during mergers and acquisitions, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the specific leadership strategies that effectively foster engagement within the Zambian banking sector. Empirical research examining this relationship is limited, particularly concerning Access Bank's acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during this acquisition. By examining the specific leadership strategies employed and their effects on employee engagement, the study seeks to provide actionable insights that can inform best practices for leadership during organizational change, ultimately contributing to a more engaged and resilient workforce in the Zambian banking sector

1.2 Research Objectives

i. Assess how these styles of leadership impacted employee engagement
ii. Evaluate how communication impacted employee engagement throughout the acquisition.
iii. The study achieves these goals by providing context-specific insights on the notion of effective leadership practices in the banking sector during organizational change.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

This study is grounded on the Transformational Leadership Theory of Bass and Riggio (2006) which states that transformational leaders exert influence over employees mainly by establishing a vision to be pursued collectively, building trust, stimulating new ideas and considering the individual needs of their followers. It consists of four components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Transformational leadership models are particularly relevant within organizational change, where employees need comfort, direction and emotional support in the face of uncertainty. Hussain et al. (2018) said that transformational leaders contributed to adaptability and resilience by providing a supportive environment and encouraging participation in change efforts. Transformational leadership also facilitates trust and commitment in mergers and acquisitions (Agarwal et al., 2022). This study employs transformational leadership theory as the theoretical backdrop through which Access Bank leadership strategies influenced employee engagement in the face of acquisition.

2.1.2 Employee Engagement Theory

It also employs Kahn's (1990) theory of Employee Engagement as the working definition of employee engagement is emotion, cognition and physical presence one invests in job roles. Engaged Employee Display Personal (Vigor) Dedication, Commitment and Discretionary Effort Towards Organizational Goals, Organizational culture, leadership behavior, communication and psychological safety drive engagement (Islam et al, 2022). The leadership type based on trust, transparency and including employees promotes engagement in time of change (Geng et al., 2021). Potnuru et al. (2023) highlights that participative leadership and employee voice reinforce commitment to an organization through commitment readiness for change.

This theory explains how communication effectiveness, organizational support and leadership practices related to employee morale and commitment that surfaced during Access Bank's acquisition. Leadership and Organizational Change Organizational change literature emphasizes the role of leadership in managing uncertainty and resistance when organizations merge or are acquired. Through clear guidance and fast decision making, directive leadership maintains with the risk of reducing employee participation and engagement but if it comes together with communication and support. In contrast, participative leadership promotes employee participation in decision-making leading to a sense of ownership and engagement. Rizka et al. (2022) show that participative leadership improves trust, morale, and commitment in the acquisition context. Contingency leadership combines both directive and participative approaches, adjusting behavior based on the needs of the situation. According to Mpundu and Kachamba (2024), this approach can be effective during transitions made within dynamic settings or industries such as banking, which requires not only decisiveness to enact changes quickly but also the new flexibility. Business Communications and Engagement of Employee in Organizational Transformation During change, communication remains a critical lever impacting engagement among employees. Clear communication can help reduce uncertainty, build trust and clearly articulate organizational purpose. Ahmad and Cheng (2018) found that transparent communication plays a positive role in commitment of change initiatives. Employees often concern to the job security, culture change in M&A scenario and Role changes. Leaders who are open with communication, share updates promptly and ask for feedback keep the trust and engagement levels high. Albrecht et al. (2023) stresses that routine communication improves perceived organizational support and psychological safety in periods of transformation.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Types of Leadership Strategies Employed by Banks During the Acquisition of Other Banks

During the acquisition of other banks, financial institutions often employ various leadership strategies to manage the change process and ensure the smooth integration of the acquired entity (Adeleye et al., 2019). These strategies are crucial as they directly influence how effectively merging organizations can align their operations, cultures, and objectives. One common approach is the implementation of a directive leadership strategy, where the acquiring bank's leadership team adopts a more authoritative, top-down decision-making approach (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018). This strategy establishes clear directives and expectations from the outset, streamlining processes and eliminating ambiguity during significant changes. However, while directive leadership can facilitate rapid decision-making, it may also lead to resistance from employees of the acquired bank if not accompanied by effective communication and support mechanisms (Ramos-Maçães & Román-Portas, 2022).

Competing findings in the literature suggest that while directive leadership promotes efficiency, it can inadvertently foster a culture of compliance rather than collaboration. For instance, studies indicate that employees may feel disenfranchised if decisions are made centrally with limited consultation, leading to confusion and frustration (Kasempa, 2021). Conversely, other research highlights that when employees are informed and involved, they are more likely to embrace changes and contribute positively to the integration process (Ali et al., 2025). This divergence emphasizes the need for leaders to balance decisiveness with engagement, recognizing that successful acquisitions depend not only on operational efficiency but also on fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Another strategy employed by banks during acquisitions is the adoption of a participative leadership approach, where the leadership team actively involves employees from both the acquiring and acquired banks in the change process (Rizka et al., 2022). This approach emphasizes collaboration and shared decision-making, allowing employees to contribute their insights and expertise to integration efforts. While this participative strategy has been shown to enhance employee engagement and buy-in, it may require more time and resources to implement, as it involves extensive communication and consensus-building (Siasulingana, 2024). Previous studies have demonstrated that participative leadership can lead to improved morale and stronger commitment to organizational goals, particularly in contexts where cultural dynamics are paramount (Mulenga, 2023). However, methodological differences in these studies often limit the generalizability of their findings, particularly in developing economies like Zambia, where unique cultural and regulatory factors come into play.

Participative leadership also facilitates knowledge sharing and the cross-pollination of best practices across the merged organization. By involving employees at various levels, organizations can tap into diverse experiences and insights, potentially leading to innovative solutions and improved operational efficiencies. However, maintaining momentum in a participative process requires skilled facilitation and clear roles to ensure discussions remain productive (Bah et al., 2024). Despite the challenges, the benefits of participative leadership often outweigh the drawbacks, yielding a more resilient cultural integration and a stronger sense of shared purpose among employees. This dynamic illustrates the intermediary role of organizational culture in shaping the relationship between leadership strategies and employee engagement, particularly in the context of African organizations.

Some banks also employ a combination of directive and participative leadership strategies, known as a contingency approach, where the leadership team adapts its strategy based on the specific needs and challenges of the acquisition process (Mpundu & Kachamba, 2024). This adaptive strategy recognizes that different phases of the acquisition may require varying leadership strategies. For instance, during critical milestones such as regulatory approvals, a more directive approach may be necessary to ensure timely decision-making. Conversely, as integration stabilizes, shifting toward a participative approach can promote engagement and collaboration (Malambo, 2022).

This flexibility is essential, particularly in the Zambian banking sector, where external factors such as regulatory changes and market dynamics can significantly impact the success of mergers and acquisitions (Shawa, 2022). However, the existing literature on leadership strategies in acquisitions often lacks a focus on the Zambian context, highlighting a research gap specific to developing-economy banking sectors. By examining the interplay between directive and participative strategies within the unique cultural and operational landscape of Zambia, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform both theory and practice in future acquisitions.

2.2.2 The Effect of Leadership Strategies Used by During the Acquisition Process on Employee Engagement

The leadership strategies employed by banks during the acquisition process can significantly influence employee engagement, particularly within the Zambian banking context. Directive leadership, characterized by clear orders, structured workflows, and a focus on tasks and outcomes, can be effective for speed and alignment during specific phases of integration. However, if this approach is not paired with effective communication and support mechanisms, it may lead to feelings of disempowerment and disengagement among employees. When employees perceive that their concerns, ideas, and perspectives are not valued, their intrinsic motivation often declines. This disconnect can manifest as lower morale, reduced productivity, and diminished commitment to the organization, ultimately impeding timely integration and the realization of strategic objectives (Simatyaba, 2022; Islam et al., 2022). Moreover, the organizational culture in Zambia, which may emphasize community and collaboration, can exacerbate these negative effects, increasing the risk of turnover among key talent and slowing cultural assimilation. This suggests that organizational culture acts as a moderator, shaping how leadership strategies impact employee engagement during acquisitions.

Conversely, a participative leadership approach can foster a strong sense of ownership and investment among employees, as they feel their contributions are valued and their voices are heard (Potnuru et al., 2023). In this context, when leaders actively seek input, facilitate dialogue, and involve staff in decision-making related to the integration plan, employees are more likely to perceive the changes as fair and legitimate. This sense of inclusion enhances psychological safety, encourages proactive problem-solving, and promotes commitment to shared goals. As a result, engagement tends to rise because employees see a direct link between their efforts and the achievement of organizational objectives. Furthermore, participative leadership can help identify potential implementation challenges early, enabling more effective collaboration across teams and smoother transitions (Rizka et al., 2022). In the Zambian banking sector, where employee resilience is crucial, this approach can improve trust in leadership, strengthen team cohesion, and create a more resilient workforce during periods of uncertainty. Thus, employee resilience serves as an intermediary variable, influencing how leadership and communication strategies affect engagement outcomes.

The contingency approach, which combines directive and participative elements, can help strike a balance between the need for efficient integration and the necessity for employee engagement (Shafi et al., 2021). By adapting their leadership strategy to the specific needs of the acquisition process, leaders can activate the most effective mix of guidance and inclusion at different moments in the integration journey. This flexibility allows for rapid decision-making and clear accountability when fast action is required, while simultaneously inviting input, dialogue, and shared ownership to address concerns, reduce uncertainty, and foster commitment. Bah et al. (2024) argue that banks can leverage this nuanced approach to ensure that employees feel heard and supported without sacrificing clear direction and timelines for integration. In practice, this means calibrating the level of directive instruction and the degree of participatory involvement according to the phase of integration, urgency of milestones, and the diverse needs of stakeholder groups. When executed effectively, the contingency approach can sustain operational momentum, preserve morale, and promote adaptive problem-solving as the organization navigates post-acquisition realignments and cultural integration. This highlights the importance of linking leadership strategies with the organizational culture and employee resilience in shaping employee engagement outcomes during acquisitions in the Zambian banking sector.

2.2.3 The Role of Communication in Leadership Strategies During the Bank Acquisition Process on Employee Engagement

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful leadership, particularly during organizational changes such as bank acquisitions. As organizations undergo significant transitions, the clarity and transparency of communication from leadership can substantially influence employee engagement. According to Ahmad and Cheng (2018), the content and context of communication during change initiatives are critical in shaping employees' commitment to the organization. In the case of Access Bank's acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank, leaders must articulate the vision and rationale behind the acquisition to foster a sense of belonging and purpose among employees. This approach not only mitigates uncertainty but also enhances employee trust in leadership, which is vital for maintaining engagement during turbulent times.

However, competing findings in the literature indicate that while effective communication is essential, the actual implementation varies significantly across organizations. For instance, some studies highlight that a lack of effective communication can lead to increased employee anxiety and disengagement (Ramos-Mações & Román-Portas, 2022), while others suggest that even well-structured communication strategies may fall short if not tailored to the specific cultural context of the organization (Li et al., 2021). These methodological differences underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how communication strategies are developed and executed in different banking environments.

Moreover, the strategy of communication adopted by leaders plays a significant role in how employees perceive and respond to organizational change. Transformational leadership, characterized by open dialogue and encouragement of employee feedback, has been shown to positively affect employee engagement during periods of change (Faupel & Süß, 2019). Leaders who employ a transformational approach are more likely to create an inclusive environment where employees feel valued and heard. However, methodological variations such as sample size, context, and measurement of employee engagement—can lead to differing conclusions about the effectiveness of these strategies. This highlights the importance of extracting lessons from prior studies to inform the design of this research, particularly in the context of the Zambian banking sector.

In addition to the strategy of communication, the timing and frequency of updates during the acquisition process are crucial. Regular communication helps keep employees informed about the progress of the acquisition and any changes that may affect them. Albrecht et al. (2023) emphasize that timely communication can enhance the psychological conditions necessary for employee engagement, such as trust and perceived organizational support. In the context of Access Bank's acquisition of Atlas Mara, consistent updates from leadership about the integration process would not only keep employees informed but also reinforce their connection to the organization, thereby boosting engagement levels.

Furthermore, the role of communication extends beyond just relaying information; it also involves listening to employee concerns and feedback. Effective leaders recognize the importance of two-way communication, which fosters a sense of involvement among employees during the acquisition process (Ramos-Mações & Román-Portas, 2022). This participatory communication strategy aligns with the conceptual framework, emphasizing the importance of leadership strategy in influencing employee engagement through enhanced organizational culture and employee resilience. However, existing literature often overlooks the specific cultural nuances within the Zambian context, highlighting a research gap that this study aims to address.

The effect of leadership communication on employee engagement during acquisitions is further supported by the notion of trust. Islam et al. (2022) highlight that trust in leadership is a significant predictor of employee engagement, especially during times of change. When leaders communicate transparently and authentically, they build trust with their employees, which can lead to higher levels of engagement. In the case of Access Bank, establishing trust through effective communication could help mitigate resistance to change and encourage employees to embrace the new organizational direction. This dynamic illustrates how communication effectiveness acts as an independent variable influencing employee engagement, moderated by the organizational culture prevalent in the Zambian banking sector.

The integration of communication strategies with leadership practices can enhance overall employee engagement during the acquisition process. As noted by Bah et al. (2024), employee involvement in decision-making and change initiatives is crucial for successful organizational transformation. Leaders who prioritize communication and actively involve employees in the acquisition process are more likely to foster a culture of engagement. This holistic approach not only supports employees during the transition but also contributes to the long-term success of the newly formed entity, as engaged employees are more likely to contribute positively to organizational performance.

Contextualizing these findings within the Zambian banking sector, it becomes evident that the interplay between leadership strategies, communication effectiveness, and support mechanisms is essential for enhancing employee engagement, particularly in a cultural landscape that values collective input and resilience.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design merging both quantitative and qualitative methods was utilized to better understand how leadership affects employee engagement within the context of change. Data of the quantitative phase are survey data measuring perceptions of leadership strategies and levels of engagement. These two additional qualitative phases provided a more detailed understanding of the employee experience and the leadership behaviours surrounding the acquisition. Triangulation was possible through this approach and findings were more valid and reliable.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The site of the study was Access Bank Zambia Limited, in Lusaka which is the center for operations and acquisitions (banking) of the bank. Population that consisted of leaders and employees of Access Bank and Atlas Mara Bank Zambia Limited as representative respondents from senior management, middle management, front-line staff.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Calculating the Sample Size Using Slovin's Formula, a sample of 150 was found. We distributed 150 questionnaires, among which 145 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 96.6%. Random sampling was performed for selecting participants in the quantitative phase to guarantee representativeness and minimize selection bias. Qualitative interviews were conducted with seven senior managers, all with acquisition experience, identified through purposive sampling.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires with five-point Likert scale items and semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions that are designed to prompt a detailed view on leadership strategies and employee experiences were used for gathering primary data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software for descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and ANOVA; and reported as quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, coded from interview transcripts into recurrent themes on leadership, communication and engagement.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed the ethical provisions of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Research Committee at the University of Zambia Graduate School of Business.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents were mostly within the 25–34 age range (40%) followed by 45–54 years (24.8%) with those aged 35 to 44 at three quarters of this level (17.9 %), indicating staff of both younger natures and some more experienced workers. 60% were male and 40% female. Most of them were equipped with a diploma or bachelor that gave them familiarity with the organizational processes and practices of leadership during the acquisition.

4.1.1 Leadership Strategies during the acquisition

Access Bank combined both directive, participative and contingency leadership approaches. Centralized decision-making, structured integration, and operational directives that employees recognized as priority this was arguably a definitive style of directive leadership.

Table 1 presents the survey results on various leadership strategies employed during the acquisition process, highlighting respondents' perceptions of directive, participative, and contingency leadership. The data indicates varying levels of agreement, with contingency leadership receiving the highest mean score, suggesting its effectiveness in adapting to situational demands.

Table 1
Leadership Strategies

Leadership strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
Directive Leadership	12	75	12	29	17	1.92	.559
Participative Leadership	0	63	53	29	0	1.83	.613
Contingency Leadership	0	82	46	17	0	2.28	.918

The leadership strategies employed during the acquisition process were notably influenced by participative approaches, as evidenced by the survey results. The data indicates that 63% of respondents agreed with the effectiveness of participative leadership, while 53% remained neutral, and no respondents strongly disagreed, resulting in a mean score of 1.83 with a standard deviation of 0.613. This suggests that participative strategies were well-received, fostering inclusivity through meetings, feedback sessions, and team engagements, which are critical during strategic decision-making (Simatyaba, 2022; Shafi et al., 2021). In contrast, directive leadership received mixed responses, with 12% strongly agreeing and 75% agreeing, leading to a mean score of 1.92 and a standard deviation of 0.559. This implies that while directive strategies were recognized as necessary, particularly in urgent situations, they were not as favorably viewed as participative methods.

Furthermore, contingency leadership had a mean score of 2.28 and a standard deviation of 0.918, with 82% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing on its relevance. This highlights the adaptive nature of leadership, where strategies were adjusted based on situational demands. The findings indicate that leaders effectively applied directive approaches when urgency increased, while participative tactics were favored for addressing employee concerns and integrating organizational culture. Overall, these results underscore the importance of flexibility in leadership styles to ensure organizational survival and employee engagement during transitions.

4.1.2 Leadership strategies on employee engagement

Table 2 outlines the perceptions of employees regarding different strategies for enhancing engagement, including leadership strategy, communication effectiveness, and support mechanisms. The results illustrate that while leadership and communication were viewed positively, the implementation of support mechanisms showed more variability, indicating areas for potential improvement.

Table 2
Strategies for employee engagement

Category	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Leadership Strategy	29	99	17	0	0
Communication Effectiveness	41	87	17	0	0
Support Mechanisms	17	99	0	29	0

The findings reveal that supportive, communicative, and inclusive leadership significantly enhance employee engagement. Notably, 29% of respondents strongly agreed and 99% agreed that leadership strategies positively influenced their engagement. Additionally, 41% strongly agreed and 87% agreed on the effectiveness of communication, indicating that clear channels of communication are essential for fostering a motivated workforce. In contrast, support mechanisms received mixed responses, with only 17% strongly agreeing and 99% agreeing, while 29% disagreed, suggesting that while support is valued, its implementation may be inconsistent.

Despite the positive perceptions of these factors, single regression analysis indicated that leadership strategy alone was not a statistically significant predictor of engagement. This implies that employee engagement during change is influenced by a combination of factors, including communication, organizational culture, trust, and support systems. Qualitative findings further highlighted that some employees expressed uncertainty and anxiety regarding job security. Those who received consistent support and clear communication demonstrated greater resilience during transitions. These results align with the studies by Islam et al. (2021) and Potnuru et al. (2023), emphasizing the necessity of core components such as employee involvement, organizational support, and trust to enhance week-to-week engagement during periods of change. This underscores the complexity of engagement and the need for a multifaceted approach to effectively support employees through transitions.

4.1.3 Employee Engagement Communication

The findings in table 3 summarizes the frequency and percentage of employee responses regarding key dimensions of engagement during transitions, such as clarity of role expectations and open channels for dialogue. The data highlights that regular updates from leadership were deemed most critical, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication in fostering employee trust and commitment.

Table 3
Employee Engagement

Dimension	Frequency	Percent
Clarity of role expectations during transition	9	6.21%
Open channels for employee input and dialogue	28	19.31%
Timely clarification of rationale behind decisions	25	17.24%
Responsiveness to employee concerns (e.g., action on feedback)	16	11.03%
Regular, transparent updates from leadership	62	42.76%
Communication training for leaders (effect on engagement)	5	3.45%
Total	**145**	**100.00%**

The findings underscore the critical role of communication in enhancing employee engagement during transitions. Notably, 42.76% of respondents emphasized the importance of regular, transparent updates from leadership, indicating that consistent communication significantly contributes to employee trust and confidence in management. Additionally, 19.31% of employees highlighted the need for open channels for input and dialogue, while 17.24% stressed the necessity of timely clarification of the rationale behind decisions. These statistics suggest that when employees are informed and involved, they are more likely to feel motivated and committed to their roles. Conversely, the data reveals that 11.03% of respondents felt that responsiveness to employee concerns, such as action on feedback, was crucial for their engagement. However, gaps in communication, particularly regarding the slow dissemination of changes to roles or integration processes, led to feelings of anxiety and disengagement among staff. Only 6.21% of respondents felt clarity of role expectations during the transition was effectively communicated, highlighting a potential area for improvement.

These results align with the research of Ahmad and Cheng (2018) and Albrecht et al. (2023), which emphasize the primacy of communication as a facilitator for commitment, psychological safety, and perceived support during periods of change. This underlines the necessity for organizations to prioritize transparent communication strategies to foster a more engaged and resilient workforce.

4.1.4 Organizational Support and Employee Resilience

The findings in the figure below show the findings on the level of support received from leadership during access bank's acquisition over atlas mara bank Zambia limited.

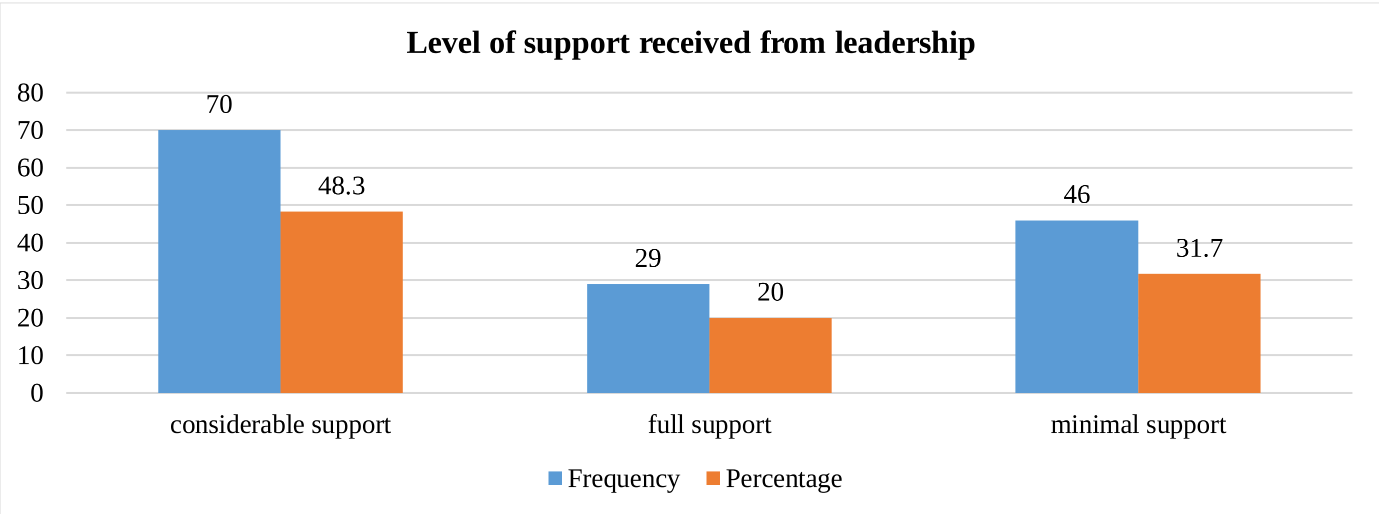

Figure 1
Organizational support

Table 4 details respondents' perceptions of organizational support mechanisms, including collaborative, inclusive, and adaptive strategies. The findings suggest that effective support mechanisms significantly contribute to employee resilience, underscoring the need for organizations to address both operational and emotional dimensions during transitions.

Table 4
Organizational support mechanisms

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collaborative	12	116	17	0	0	2.03	.447
Inclusive	17	99	29	0	0	2.08	.559
Adaptive	24	92	29	0	0	2.03	.606

Effective organizational support mechanisms helped employees to become resilient. Being in a position to consult mentors served as an emotional sidekick of sorts. The availability of training and management also made the transition run smoothly for employees. Support also reduce resistance and encourage collaboration between those who experienced more, saying that, when reporting strong support by their managers were committed to working together agreed. This finding suggests that leading through change needs to involve more than just operational considerations, and include the emotional and psychological dimensions.

4.2 Correlations

According to the study findings, Table 5 presents the correlation analysis among leadership strategy, communication effectiveness, and support mechanisms. The results indicate strong positive correlations between leadership and communication, while both are negatively correlated with support mechanisms, suggesting that effective leadership and communication may reduce the perceived need for additional support.

Table 5
Correlations

		Leadership strategy	Communication effectiveness	Support mechanisms
Leadership strategy	Pearson Correlation	1	.649**	-.644**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	145	145	145
Communication effectiveness	Pearson Correlation	.649**	1	-.842**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	145	145	145
Support mechanisms	Pearson Correlation	-.644**	-.842**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	145	145	145

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis reveals several important relationships. The findings reveal that effective leadership and communication are strongly positively correlated, and both are strongly negatively correlated with support mechanisms suggesting that stronger leadership and communication reduce the perceived need for support.

4.3 Model summary

Table 6 provides an overview of the regression model's fit and predictive power concerning employee engagement. The R-squared value of 0.337 indicates that the model explains a significant portion of the variance in employee engagement, suggesting that the included predictors are relevant in understanding this relationship.

Table 6
Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.581[a]	.337	.323	.996
a. Predictors: (Constant), Support mechanisms, Leadership strategy, Communication effectiveness				

The model summary table provides important insights into the overall fit and predictive power of the regression model. The R-squared value of 0.337 indicates that the model explains 33.7% of the variance in employee engagement. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.323 suggests that the model has good generalizability, as the adjusted value is only slightly lower than the unadjusted R-squared.

4.4 ANOVA[a]

The results in Table 7 reports the results of the ANOVA analysis, confirming the statistical significance of the regression model. The findings indicate that the predictors leadership strategy, communication effectiveness, and support mechanisms play a crucial role in explaining employee engagement during the acquisition process.

Table 7
ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	71.187	3	23.729	23.920	.000[b]
	Residual	139.875	141	.992		
	Total	211.062	144			

a. Dependent Variable: employee engagement
b. Predictors: (Constant), Support mechanisms, Leadership strategy, Communication effectiveness

The ANOVA table confirms the overall statistical significance of the regression model. These results reinforce the importance of the model's predictors (leadership strategy, communication effectiveness, and support mechanisms) in understanding and explaining employee engagement during the acquisition process. The statistical significance of the model suggests that the organization should prioritize these factors when developing strategies to enhance employee engagement and resilience.

4.5 Regression Coefficients[a]

In accordance to the study findings, Table 8 presents the regression coefficients for the predictors of employee engagement, including their unstandardized and standardized values. The results reveal that communication effectiveness and support mechanisms significantly contribute to employee engagement, while leadership strategy did not show a statistically significant effect.

Table 8
Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	6.416	.888		7.221	.000
	Leadership strategy	.020	.201	.009	.101	.919
	Communication effectiveness	.621	.260	.314	2.388	.018
	Support mechanisms	1.089	.173	.826	6.308	.000

a. Dependent Variable: employee engagement

The findings from the regression analysis underscore the significant role of communication effectiveness and support mechanisms in enhancing employee engagement during organizational change, particularly in the context of Access Bank's acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank. The positive predictors identified communication effectiveness ($B = 0.621$, $p < 0.05$) and support mechanisms ($B = 1.089$, $p < 0.001$) align with the literature reviewed, which emphasizes the critical importance of clear communication and robust support structures in fostering employee engagement during times of transition. As noted by Islam et al. (2021), effective leadership is vital in guiding employees through the uncertainties of organizational change. The results suggest that while leadership strategies are important, they may not be as directly impactful on employee engagement as the quality of communication and the provision of support mechanisms.

Interestingly, the finding that leadership strategy was not a significant predictor of employee engagement ($B = 0.020$, $p = 0.919$) challenges some of the established literature that emphasizes the necessity of effective leadership in driving engagement during change. For instance, transformational leadership, characterized by its ability to inspire and motivate employees, has been highlighted as a key factor in enhancing engagement (Ahmadi, 2024). However, the results indicate that the direct influence of leadership strategy may be overshadowed by the more immediate effects of communication and support mechanisms, suggesting that organizations should prioritize these elements to cultivate engagement. This aligns with the views of Potnuru et al. (2023), who argue that fostering employee involvement and communication is essential for successful change initiatives, reinforcing the idea that leaders must focus on creating an environment where employees feel heard and supported.

Moreover, the findings resonate with the literature on the role of organizational culture and employee resilience as intermediary variables that influence engagement during change (Shafi et al., 2021). The emphasis on support mechanisms, such as training and coaching, reflects the need for organizations to equip employees with the tools necessary to navigate change effectively. This approach not only enhances their resilience but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the organization's objectives. The importance of a supportive organizational culture is further supported by the literature, which highlights that leaders who create environments conducive to open communication and collaboration can significantly enhance employee engagement (Li et al., 2021). By investing in support mechanisms, Access Bank can cultivate a more resilient workforce that is better prepared to adapt to change.

The findings from this study highlight the necessity for Access Bank to prioritize communication effectiveness and support mechanisms over traditional leadership strategies to enhance employee engagement during the acquisition process. While leadership remains a critical component of organizational change, the results suggest that the effectiveness of leadership strategies may be contingent upon the quality of communication and the support provided to employees. As such, the organization should focus on developing robust communication channels and comprehensive support systems to foster a more engaged and resilient workforce. This approach not only aligns with the literature reviewed but also positions Access Bank for greater success in navigating the complexities of organizational change.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The role of leadership in employee engagement during the acquisition of Atlas Mara Bank Zambia Limited by Access Bank Zambia limited was studied. Results validate the most critical role leadership plays in driving employee engagement, morale and attitudes throughout any transition. Access Bank employed directive, participative and contingency leadership styles. Leadership strategy did not have a statistically significant predictive impact on engagement; however, morale, trust, resilience, and commitment were significantly impacted by both organizational support and communication effectiveness.

Engagement in uncertainty is supported by transparent communication, involvement of employees and leadership that reinforces the situation. The research points out that during change one needs to blend operational efficiency with employee centric leadership. The findings of this study extend the field of organizational change management research in a Zambian banking sector context, which period of change can be likened to similar organizations going through mergers and acquisitions.

5.2 Recommendations

Improve communication strategies: Continuous communication is key to effective management of organizational change in banking. Encourage Participative Leadership → With acquisitions, a common approach is for leaders to unite employees in collaborative decision making– with the involvement boosting trust, ownership and commitment as most important elements of successful collaboration. Strengthening Support Structures: Organizations can establish robust support systems by incorporating mentorship, counseling avenues, wellness programs, and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Develop Leadership Capacity: Financial institutions should focus on investing in leadership development with emphasis on enhancing change management, emotional intelligence and communication skills. There is need for organizations to bond, form partnerships, embrace diverse perspectives and principles with some strategic stewardship by executive leadership: Take Periodic Employee Feedback: Organizations must evaluate employee sentiments and engagement continuously, especially during transitions, so as to pinpoint issues that need attention and act upon them.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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