

A Situational Leadership Framework for Enhancing the Survival and Sustainability of SMEs in Botswana's Agrifood Sector

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to develop a Situational Leadership style Framework for the survival and sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Botswana's Agriculture and Food (Agrifood) Sector. Toward this end, this study adopts a convergent mixed-methods methods approach. The data is collected through physical questionnaires and in-depth interviews. A simple linear regression model is estimated using the R programming language for quantitative data analysis. The qualitative data is analysed using thematic analysis, verbatim transcription, and quotations. The research examines the Situational Leadership style and its influence on the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The study's findings indicate that the Situational Leadership style significantly influences SMEs' survival and sustainability in Botswana's Agrifood Sector. The contribution to knowledge is the Situational Leadership framework for leadership styles that depicts the emerging leadership styles from this study: mentorship, coaching, flexible, responsive, agile, adaptable, empowering, and exemplary leadership. These emerging leadership styles are depicted in the Situational Leadership framework, which identifies leadership styles that influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in Botswana's Agrifood Sector. The study's main limitation is that a Google Scholar search yielded no results from previous matching studies that researched how the Situational Leadership style influences the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. However, this limitation does not necessarily affect the study's validity because the research findings can be generalised to other SMEs, since SMEs tend to face similar survival and sustainability challenges.

Keywords: Situational Leadership Style, Situational Leadership Framework, Survival, Sustainability, Agrifood Sector, Verbatim Transcription.

INTRODUCTION

The Agriculture and Food (Agrifood) Sector is a global imperative, where research on factors that promote economically viable food systems remains inadequate [1,2]. The aforementioned assertion on limited research on food systems calls for examining factors that can promote viable food systems. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operate in an increasingly complex business environment, where adopting a suitable and effective leadership style promotes the strategic focus, competitiveness, and survival and sustainability (SS) of the SMEs [3,4]. Effective leadership can help SMEs overcome these complexities [5].

SMEs in African countries, including Botswana, face various challenges that threaten their long-term success, with leadership playing a critical role [6,7,8]. Observations linking SME failures to leadership constraints inspired this research, which aims to identify the specific leadership styles that influence the SS of Botswana's Agrifood Sector. Amoah-mensah and Darkwa and Novelli and de Souza [9,10] suggested that a leader must be dynamic and exercise flexibility by adopting a leadership style that promotes organisational SS. Effective leadership has been suggested as one of the contributors to SME resilience, growth, and sustainability, by stimulating the performance of the followers; thereby leading to SME SS [11,12] SMEs play a significant role in food supply chains in low to middle-income countries and for them to survive in today's highly competitive and complex economic world, they require effective leadership [13,14]. Additionally, the current volatile and competitive global economic climate requires leaders to review their leadership styles in favour of corporate sustainability-focused and innovative leadership [15,16].

Studies highlight that SMEs in the Agrifood Sector are critical to food production in low and middle-income countries, producing up to 80% of the global food requirements [17]. The scarcity of financial resources as well as the knowledge, management, and leadership gaps that characterise SMEs make them vulnerable to the economic crisis caused by the highly competitive and volatile global economy [18,15].

In a constantly evolving world, leaders are expected to demonstrate high levels of agility and adopt an effective leadership style [19,20]. The evolving multidisciplinary fields of leadership and corporate sustainability call for contextualised research [15], and true to that call, this research was based on the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. Furthermore, studies reveal that SMEs with a sustainability focus tend to be more competitive and survive longer [15].

SMEs undoubtedly form the backbone of any economy for a variety of reasons, which include employment creation, poverty alleviation, and driving innovation. The stark reality is that despite their significance, SMEs continue to fail and hardly survive beyond five years [21,14], with the revelation by Pett et al. [12]) that empowering leadership promotes the SS of SMEs. Furthermore, even though SMEs are credited with providing innovative solutions to economic problems, about 80% of SMEs in developing countries like Botswana have a significantly high failure rate [22]. In Botswana, SMEs contribute to 50% of formal employment [23]. SMEs promote scalable and novel business opportunities, contributing up to "50% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of African economies" [24 p.1]. Given the proliferation of SMEs and their positive contribution to economic development, studies on their growth, survival and sustainability remain very critical [4]. The broader literature is awash with a multiplicity of leadership styles, from traditional to modern styles [19]. However, the central objectives of this study focus on the four dimensions of the Situational Leadership (SL) style, as the SL style has been identified as a flexible leadership style that influences the SS of SMEs [25,10]. Traditionally, scholars have discussed four dimensions of the SL style as follows: (i) Directing, (ii) Coaching (iii) Supporting and (iv) Delegating leadership styles [26,25].

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of this study is to develop a Situational Leadership (SL) style framework for the Agrifood Sector in Botswana that farmers can implement to enhance productivity. The

framework aims to influence the reform, growth, survival, and sustainability of SMEs within the sector. This investigation is conducted in response to the persistent challenge of low agricultural production, which currently fails to meet market demand [27]. In a State of the Nation Address (SONA), held on the 5th of November 2023, the former President of the Republic of Botswana, Dr Mokgweetsi E.K Masisi announced that the restriction ban was bearing fruit as it has led to a reduction in Botswana's fresh produce import bill from P634 million in 2018 to P182 million in 2023. Nonetheless, the restriction ban has not completely curbed food insecurities as local farmers are still not able to meet the demand for horticultural products like cabbages, tomatoes, potatoes and onions [28].

SURVIVAL AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SMES IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR IN BOTSWANA

Research indicates that only a small percentage of SMEs successfully transition from one generation to the next, primarily due to inadequate capital funding and ineffective leadership styles [29,15]. The survival and sustainability (SS) of SMEs remain a significant concern [30]. Furthermore, studies on the sustainability of SMEs within the Agrifood Sector are limited, despite the critical role these businesses play in food security and national economic development [16].

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

It is against the background to ascertain how the Situational Leadership style significantly influences (s) the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana, that the following research objectives and research question were formulated. The research objectives adopted for the study are: (a) To determine the influence of Situational Leadership on the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana and (b) To develop a Situational Leadership framework for the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana.

The following research question was formulated for this study: (a) What is the influence of Situational Leadership on the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana?

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

The proposed conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 below was proposed as a guide for this study, to determine the influence of the SL style on the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The framework depicts the relationship between the four dimensions of the SL style and SS of SMEs in Botswana's Agrifood Sector.

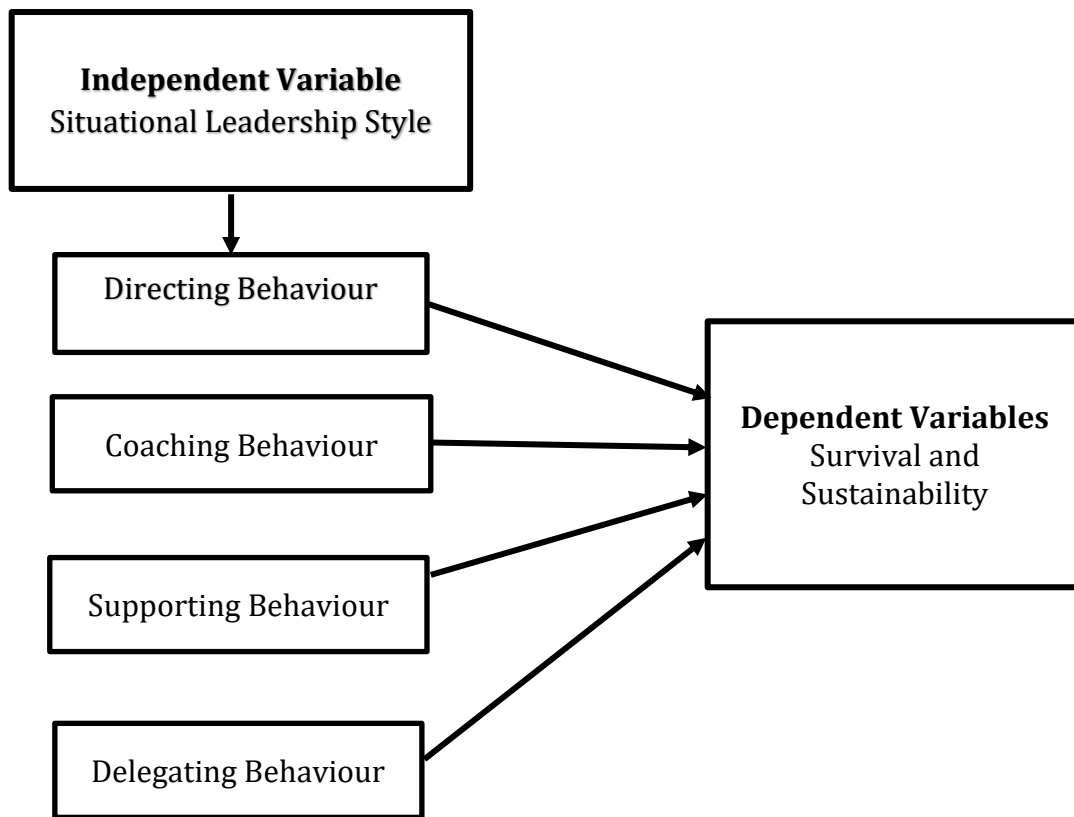


Figure 1: A Proposed Conceptual Framework For The Study

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on the leadership styles employed by SMEs remain limited, where, as a consequence, there is a vital need to understand the influence of leadership styles on the performance of SMEs [4]. Although there is no generally accepted definition for leadership, scholars concur that leadership is a process that involves “influencing a group of people towards the attainment of a common goal” [25 p.31]. Leadership remains one concept that remains with no common definition, because it is dynamic, multifaceted, and complex [25]. Studies on leadership styles have increasingly grown in significance, yet the key aspects of leadership styles that determine sustainability remain an area that requires further research [9]. Although numerous studies on leadership styles have been recorded, these studies mainly focused on leadership styles in general and did not focus on leadership styles and their influence on the Agrifood Sector, SS in particular [25]. This literature review will discuss the theory adopted for this study, the Situational Leadership theory.

The Situational Leadership Theory

The Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) is one of the most prominent theories; as it is premised on the assertion that situations are different and hence calls for leadership styles to suit the particular situation, as no one specific style of leadership is applicable for all conditions and thus flexibility and adaptability are key [25,10]. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard’s revised SLT suggests four leadership styles; directing, coaching, supporting and delegating as discussed in Section 6.2. The four leadership styles represent different amounts of supportive (consideration) and directive (initiating structure) behaviours. The SLT statement of the theory by Hersey and Blanchard was initially pronounced in 1972 and revised in 2007. As years have

progressed, an alternative theory with an emphasis on follower experience has emerged and, in the process, SLT has gained popularity [31].

Despite recorded limitations of the SLT, recent studies hail the flexibility of the leadership style, in support of the dynamic nature of leadership in a constantly evolving world [10]. Moreover, the strength and success of the STL over the past 50 years lie in the SLT's emphasis on giving support to followers after adapting to their needs and leader flexibility [10]. Moreover, the SLT was quite supportive of this study, whereby leaders are called upon to be flexible in their chosen style of leadership, to promote long-term organisational SS. The situational leadership theory is premised on the assertion that different situations require different leadership styles and an effective leader has to adapt his leadership style according to the dictates of the particular situation. In like manner, the situational leadership framework does not prescribe a particular leadership style for a given situation but calls on leaders to assess the situation at hand and exercise flexibility to make effective decisions.

For situational leaders to be effective, they need to identify the needs of their followers and adapt their leadership styles to suit the needs of the followers accordingly [25,10]. Furthermore, Novelli and de Souza [10] argue that situational leaders adopt a directive style when dealing with a complex situation where followers have no experience, yet leaders adopt a participative leadership style for more experienced followers. It is therefore plausible to conclude that the situational leadership style allows for leadership flexibility and adaptability to cater to varying follower needs.

SLT has been described as a contingency theory, whereby a leader has to assess a particular situation and apply a leadership style that would seem favourable to that particular situation [32]. The SLT has been hailed for its assertion that there is no one particular leadership style that is best for all circumstances [33,34]. Thompson and Vecchio [p.33] identified “four” combinations of subordinate maturity (development levels) and leadership style as follows: (1) the subordinate of very low maturity who should benefit from a “telling” style of supervision, (2) the subordinate of moderately low maturity who should benefit from a “selling” style of supervision, (3) the subordinate of moderately high maturity who should benefit from a “participating” style of supervision, and (4) the subordinate of very high maturity who should benefit from a “delegating” style of supervision. Essentially, SLT proposes that follower maturity and readiness for self-direction are essential in determining the optimal leadership style [33]

Dimensions of the Situational Leadership Theory (SLT)

Essentially, the dimensions of the SL style have been described as follows: (i) High Directive, Low Supportive (Directive Leadership Style) (ii) High Directive, High Supportive (Coaching Leadership Style), (iii) High Supportive, Low Directive (Supportive Leadership Style) and (iv) Low Supportive, Low Directive (Delegating Leadership Style) [25,35].

- **Directing (S1: High Directive, Low Supportive):** The leader provides clear instructions, defines tasks, and closely supervises goal achievement while offering minimal support.

- **Coaching (S2: High Directive, High Supportive):** The leader balances goal accomplishment with emotional support, making final decisions while encouraging participation.
- **Supporting (S3: High Supportive, Low Directive):** The leader focuses on building relationships and provides praise and recognition, with less emphasis on organisational goals.
- **Delegating (S4: Low Supportive, Low Directive):** The leader allows team members to take responsibility for goal setting and implementation with minimal intervention.

Bosse et al. [36] further explain these leadership styles in terms of task and relationship behaviour:

- **S1:** High task, low relationship behaviour
- **S2:** High task, high relationship behaviour
- **S3:** High relationship, low task behaviour
- **S4:** Low relationship, low task behaviour

Attributes of the Situational Leadership Style

The key attributes of directive and supportive leadership behaviours were outlined by Northouse [25] below:

- **Directive Behaviour:**
 - Helps members achieve goals by defining roles, setting timelines, and evaluating performance.
 - Communication is primarily one-way and instruction-driven.
- **Supportive Behaviour:**
 - Encourages team members by fostering comfort and confidence.
 - Communication is two-way, fostering social interaction and emotional support.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Based on the preceding theoretical and empirical review, the following hypotheses were derived, and they were tested in this study:

Hypothesis One

- H₀: The Situational Leadership style does not significantly influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana.
- H₁: The Situational Leadership significantly influences the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of quantitative and qualitative or mixed-methods choice was adopted for this study. The mixed-methods methodological choice was adopted for this study to produce robust and comprehensive results that come with the integration of quantitative and qualitative data findings [37,38].

Research Design

The mixed-methods design was deemed favourable for this study, primarily because it averts any weaknesses that may inadvertently occur using a mono method, and thus enhances the

rigour and validity of the study [39]. Furthermore, a mixed-method study provides a much more robust and comprehensive study in terms of the collection, analysis as well as interpretation of data [39]. The mixed-methods methodological choice is defined as a method that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches into a single study [39]. The mixed-method approach is further defined as an approach that collects and analyses both qualitative and quantitative data rigorously in response to research questions and hypotheses. The mixed methods approach further integrates the two forms of data and their results, organises these procedures into specific research designs that provide the logic and procedures for conducting the study, and frames these procedures within theory and philosophy [40,39].

The convergent mixed-method design was adopted for this study, whereby quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analysed simultaneously. The main intention for the combination of the qualitative and quantitative data strands is for corroboration and validation purposes, and a complete understanding of the research problem, as well as yielding coherent and comprehensive results [40]. Integrating the data can occur in any or all three phases: namely the data collection phase, the data analysis phase, and the data interpretation phase [40]. In this research, data mixing was considered at the data analysis stage to avoid bias. The quantitative data was collected and analysed independently from the qualitative data.

The strengths of the convergent design, which made this design to be adopted for this study include efficiency in data collection due to the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data sets. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the convergent design include the challenges that could arise in merging the results of two different sample sizes and the possibility of divergence in the results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative data analysis [40]. Based on previous leadership studies, questionnaires are ideal for explanatory research; especially when complemented by in-depth interviews [39,41,42]. The thematic analysis was adopted for the qualitative study, to identify major and emerging themes [43,44].

Questionnaire Design and In-depth Interview Guide

A questionnaire was used to collect data for the quantitative phase of the study. The questionnaire depicted a 5-point Likert Scale based on a scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, as well as some open-ended questions. Situational leadership has been described as exhibiting both Directive and Supportive Leadership behaviours, and these factors were considered when designing the questionnaire [45]. The seven micro-behaviours of direction (initiating structure) are goal setting, planning work, showing and telling how, setting deadlines, setting priorities, defining roles and defining methods of evaluation whereas the seven micro-behaviours of support (consideration) are listening, rationale building, sharing information about self, sharing information about the organisation, facilitation of problem-solving, encouraging and asking for input [34, p.249]. The SLT dimensions considered in this study are directing coaching, supporting and delegating leadership styles and these dimensions were catered for in the questionnaire design [25].

The number of participants who took part in the in-depth interviews was guided by the proportions per strata and district, as explained under the target population section. In-depth interviews were used to collect additional information that was not captured in the questionnaire. Open-ended questions were utilised through the use of an interview guide to

gather further information on the leadership styles that influence the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector and the influence of access to Government support on leadership styles for the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and via the telephone. Efficiency in transcribing the information was upheld to promote data validity by accurately transcribing the data. An in-depth interview guide for asking questions and recording answers was utilised. An observational protocol was also used for recording observations as suggested by Creswell [46].

Target Population

The focus of the study was on commercial farms that met the SME threshold. Beef production remains the dominant agricultural activity in Botswana, followed by small-stock farming, particularly goat and sheep farming. Consequently, this study had a larger sample for data collection emerging from the animal production sector. The study was demarcated to commercial farmers who met the SME threshold in five of the 10 Agricultural Districts of Botswana, namely the Southern District, Central District, Ghanzi District, Chobe District, and the Northeast District. Commercial farmers were considered for this study mainly due to the traceability of their activities. This study focused on livestock (cattle, goat, and sheep) and commercial crop or horticulture production (sorghum, maize, citrus fruits, and vegetables), as these have been described as dominant farming outputs in Botswana.

Sampling Frame

The key to credible research is to have a sample size that is representative of a given population [47]. The Agrifood value chain is comprised of the production, processing and distribution of agricultural and food services. This study focused on SMEs in the production sector, more specifically the production of commercial crops and livestock, as these are the dominating agricultural functions in Botswana.

The sample size was derived from a formula presented by [47, p.607]. The formula is given as:

$$s = X^2NP (1 - P) \div d^2 (N - 1) + X^2P (1 - P), \quad (1)$$

Where:

- s = required sample size, (385)
- X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).
- N = the population size (2 274).
- P = the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the maximum sample size).
- d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (.05).

Given the formula above, the population of the study was calculated to be 2 274. The number 2 274 represents the total number of commercial farms in the chosen five agricultural districts with prominent agricultural output [48]. The population size represents commercial farms involved in commercial crop farming (sorghum, maize, citrus fruits, and vegetables) or horticulture as well as livestock farming (cattle, goat, and sheep) production in the Southern, Central, Ghanzi, Chobe, and North-East Districts.

The sample size was calculated using the formula presented by Krejcie and Morgan [47, p.607]. Based on the formula by Krejcie and Morgan, or a population of 2 274, the sample size was 385.

The sample size for each district was apportioned proportionately per stratum per district by dividing the population size of each farm by the total number of farms in the target population, then multiplying by the sample size derived from Krejcie and Morgan [47]. This sample size is inclusive and will be adopted for both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. For the qualitative phase of the study, a sample size of 39 was adopted. The rationale for choosing the sample size of 39 is given by Creswell and Creswell [40], who postulate that a sample size of 10% of the target population is reasonable enough to produce rich findings. However, the final sample size for qualitative research was 16, which was the data saturation, the point at which a sufficient database had been collected and no new information would surface if the study continued further [40].

The sample size for the qualitative data collection phase was drawn from the overall target population size of 385, to get 39. This sample size was apportioned proportionately for the five districts. A maximum of 16 individuals (from the original 39), were subjected to both the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews to dig deeper for more information. The respondents of the study were selected proportionately per strata for each district. This way, overlaps were avoided because the data collection was done simultaneously in any stratum.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study's objectives were primarily analysed quantitatively by applying linear regression modelling. Linear regression is a technique that is used to model linear between dependent and independent variables. Thematic analysis, coding, verbatim transcription, and quotations were adopted for the qualitative data analysis stage. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns from the data set, to produce a thematic description of the data as well as to draw and verify conclusions.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Linear regression is a statistical analysis technique whose strength lies in its ability to establish causal and effect relationships between variables. This study involved determining the influence of the SL style on survival and sustainability. For this reason, linear regression was found to be the best modelling architecture to capture the effect of the relationships that involved the study's variables of interest, consistent with previous research conducted by Keng and AlQudah [41].

Answering the research question involved modelling a simple linear regression model, because the leadership styles were analysed as a composite model, and the formula below was adopted:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

Where:

- Y: The dependent variable
- X: The independent variable
- β_0 : The intercept

- β_1 : The regression coefficient
- ϵ : The error term

The regression model was then estimated using R-programming language. The major advantage of using R is that the data analysis is reproducible, which enhances the authenticity of the analysis. It was used to determine the relationships between the variables and test hypothesis defined in the hypothesised model. The regression model in the study was estimated using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). It is a technique that aims to fit the best model by minimising the errors.

The estimated models were then used to interpret parameter estimates for each regression model. A parameter estimate was considered significant if the p-value was 0.05 or less. Conversely, parameter estimates are non-significant if the p-value is greater than 0.05. The F-statistic was reported for direct effects models and used to determine the overall direct effect of a multiple linear regression model. A p-value of more than 0.05 also represented a significant overall effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis focused on discovering recurring themes in the interview responses and the potential interaction between leadership styles and survival and sustainability. The process was conducted by assigning codes to segments of interview data that reflect the themes. These codes were then grouped and analysed thematically to identify broader patterns.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The benefits of mixed-method research designs include increased reliability and validity of the data and greater confidence in tests of the hypotheses as well as the resulting conclusions because the inadvertent weaknesses of a mono method are compensated for by the use of multi-methods [37,38]). In this study, factor loadings were utilised to measure construct validity. Higher and significant loadings show an item is highly correlated with the tested variable. A low factor loading on the other hand shows that an item is not important in measuring the underlying construct and may therefore affect model fit. Observed variables with non-significant factor loadings and with a factor loading of less than 0.30 were, therefore, excluded from a variable measurement. The exclusion was per the suggestion by Hair et al. [49], who argue that only non-significant items with a factor loading of less than 0.30 should be excluded. Authenticity was also enhanced by technical accuracy in transcribing, recording and keeping detailed records of all processes. Verbatim transcriptions utilised in this study are central to data validity and reliability. By virtue of its triangulation, the convergent mixed methods design validates the results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis stage.

The analysis went beyond simply summarising the interview data, interpreting the themes and exploring how they might connect to leadership styles survival, and sustainability. Verbatim transcripts were used to present the data from the in-depth interview participants verbatim and corroborate findings from the quantitative study. Verbatim transcripts capture all the participants' utterances accurately, enhancing the data's reliability [50]. The actual words spoken by the participants reveal their views and deep feelings Godoy et al. [50]. For that reason, in this study, verbatim quotations were utilised to corroborate the results from the

qualitative study. Furthermore, verbatim quotations used in this study supported the various themes identified in the qualitative data and provided evidence to support the results.

RESULTS

A total of 277 respondents out of a sample size of 385 completed the questionnaires. This represents a 71.95 % response rate, where 68.40% were male, aged above 26 years of age. They had varied qualifications, with most having at least a diploma qualification. All respondents worked in farming enterprises with a staff complement of less than 25 and had subordinates. Most participants were involved in goat, cattle and sheep production with very few involved in crop production. Most of the participants had less than 15 years in the agricultural production sector and were based in the Central District. There were 16 more participants for the in-depth interviews, drawn from 16 voluntary respondents to the questionnaires. The data saturation point was reached at 16 participants. Most (nine) were from the Central District, with the least (one) being from the Chobe District.

Results – Quantitative Data Analysis

The influence of the SL style on SS was analysed by estimation using a simple linear regression model that relates SS to the four dimensions of the SL style: Directing behaviour, Coaching behaviour, Supporting behaviour and Delegating behaviour. This study tested the indicators of Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Delegating leadership as a composite model in the analysis.

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

Hypothesis One:

- H₀: The Situational Leadership style does not significantly influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana.
- H₁: The Situational Leadership style significantly influences the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana.

Figure 2 indicates how the simple-linear regression model of the four composite components of SL relate to SS.

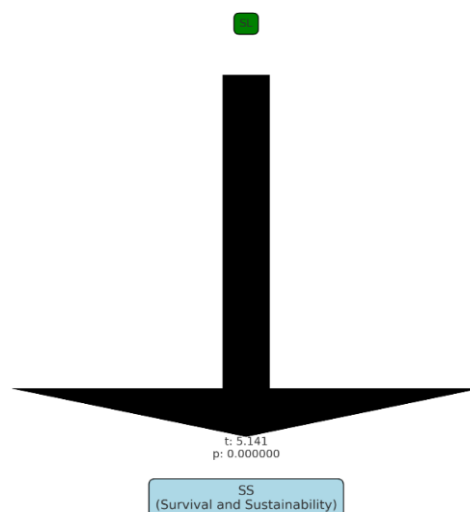


Figure 2: A simple Regression Model that relates SL and SS

Table 1 below indicates the results of the Simple Linear Regression Model

Table 1: Estimated model results –The SL style and SS

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	1.5046	0.4158	3.619	0.000374
SL	0.5407	0.1052	5.141	0.000000

The results in Figure 2 reveal that SL significantly influences the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The results revealed that the effect of the SL style on SS is significant ($\beta = 0.5407$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$).

For this reason, from the analysis and results above, the alternative hypothesis was accepted as follows:

Hypothesis One:

- H_0 : The Situational Leadership style does not significantly influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. (null hypothesis)
- H_1 : The Situational Leadership style significantly influences the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana (alternative hypothesis)

Unlike the different other leadership styles like the Transformational (TFL) and Transactional (TCL) styles which can be adopted from the MLQ questionnaire, the SL style was not analysed accordingly, but as a composite model, because the SL style is not catered for in the MLQ questionnaire. Nonetheless, this study tested the indicators of Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Delegating leadership as a composite model in the analysis. SL has been described as exhibiting both directive and supportive leadership behaviours [45].

The seven micro-behaviours of direction (initiating structure) are goal setting, planning work, showing and telling how setting deadlines, setting priorities, defining roles, and defining methods of evaluation; whereas the seven micro-behaviours of support (consideration) are: listening, rationale building, sharing information about self, sharing information about the organisation, facilitation of problem-solving, encouraging and asking for input [34]. Unlike the TFL and TCL styles which adopted questions from the MLQ, the situational SL variables were adopted from the Hersey and Blanchard Studies Ghazzawi et al. [51].

Results - Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative results, similar to the quantitative data results, also revealed a significant association between the SL style and SS. This positive association was also supported by the interview data and is discussed in the themes below. The identified themes from all 16 participants of the in-depth interview alluded to the need for flexibility as a leader when dealing with farm workers, where most of them are not educated and do not easily grasp crucial concepts. The themes for the SL style, discussed in detail in the ensuing section, are leadership flexibility, adaptability, agility, responding according to the dictates of the situation, coaching, mentorship, empowerment through employee training and development, and exemplary leadership.

THEMES EMANATING FROM THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The themes that are supportive of the SL style that emanated from this research are discussed below. These constructs demonstrate how SL can be effectively applied in SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana for long-term SS.

Leadership Flexibility, Adaptability, and Agility

The SL style is praised for its flexibility, making the leader adaptable, agile, and swiftly respond to any situation. Aigbogun and Tay [52] stated that each situation requires its leadership style. Adaptability is an emerging leadership style that encourages leader versatility [53]. Furthermore, agile leadership creates value for the SME and makes it competitive in a dynamic world because it promotes swift decision-making [54,55]. The theme of leadership flexibility, adaptability and agility is consistent with the following responses from the in-depth interview participants: *"I am very flexible and always willing to learn from my team."* – Participant 1

"I am flexible, and I can be rigid if it calls me to respond so." – Participant 2

"My leadership style is a bit flexible." – Participant 3

"I am very flexible and friendly with my team." – Participant 4

"I am very flexible, and I am not kind of a boss person." – Participants 5 and 15

"I try to be flexible in my leadership style." – Participant 8

"I am a very flexible leader." – Participants 10, 11 and 16

"I respond to different situations in the organisation promptly." – Participant 11

"I am flexible and promote teamwork and freedom of expression." – Participant 13

Responding According to The Dictates of The Situation

The SL style was favourable for this study due to its emphasis on individual performance and responding according to the dictates of a particular situation [26]. In today's volatile business environment, there is no one-size-fits-all leadership style. The constant changes in global markets call for responsive leaders, to effectively manage and adapt to both disruptions and emerging opportunities [56].

The following responses are consistent with the results of this study:

"Each situation requires one to approach with calmness depending on its magnitude." – Participant 2

"I respond to different situations differently." – Participant 6

"I respond to employees' situations differently as they emerge." – Participant 7

"I respond to different situations differently depending on the magnitude." – Participant 9

"I respond to different situations as they come." – Participant 12

"I respond to different situations by treating them with their uniqueness." – Participant 14

Coaching and Mentorship

The directing, coaching and supporting styles were the most prominent in this study as these styles work favourably for lower organisational hierarchical levels, typical of farm workers [57]. Mentorship has been studied to promote organisational growth and success [60]. On the other hand, coaching has been described as a necessary tool for building the confidence of employees and maximising their performance to achieve desired organisational goals [12]. Situational leaders focus on guiding and developing their employees through coaching and mentorship. This includes setting short-term and long-term targets and helping employees achieve these

goals through continuous support. The following responses are directly aligned to coaching and mentorship.

I guide employees through coaching, mentorship, giving them short-term and long-term targets.” – Participant 6

“I guide employees through coaching and mentorship and record-keeping.” – Participant 8

“I guide followers through coaching and giving them incentives.” – Participant 9

“I guide my followers through coaching, mentorship and tracking progress.” – Participant 10

“I guide my followers through mentorship, I give them weekly and monthly targets.” – Participant 16

Empowerment through Employee Training and Development

Situational leadership requires an understanding of employees' strengths and weaknesses, which will allow a leader to provide relevant support. Situational leadership encourages the empowerment of subordinates through guidance and offering support. Empowering leadership has been reported to provide trust and enhance confidence and competence because it involves guiding and developing followers through set targets [59]. Effective situational leadership involves providing training that aligns with employees' competencies. From the in-depth interview data, Participants 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15 and 16 had this to say about employee development and empowerment:

“I give them frequent training and supervision and work closely with them. Frequent training and supervision are valuable, and I work closely with my team.” – Participant 5

“I guide employees through coaching, mentorship, giving them short-term and long-term targets.” – Participant 6

“I guide employees through coaching and mentorship and record-keeping.” – Participant 8

“I guide followers through coaching and giving them incentives.” – Participant 9

“I guide my followers through coaching, mentorship and tracking progress.” – Participant 10

“I guide my followers through frequent training.” – Participant 13

“I guide my followers through frequent training.” – Participant 15

“I guide my followers through mentorship. I give them weekly and monthly targets.” – Participant 16

Empowerment helps employees achieve high performance and will translate to long-term success. In line with the finding of this study, a study conducted on the influence of the SL style on employee retention hailed the SL style for its emphasis on employee development needs, thereby leading to employee retention and organisational success [60]. Situational leaders prioritise employee development through frequent training, setting targets and providing growth opportunities. They recognise the varying levels of skill and experience within their team and adjust their leadership style accordingly. Such training promotes skills development and is relevant and impactful, thereby contributing to the long-term SS of the farming enterprise.

Empowering leadership develops employees while providing support, thereby helping to guide employees through challenging tasks. This approach improves the morale and productivity of employees, thereby helping a business achieve high performance and long-term success. However, Tortorella and Fogliatto [57], cautioned that delegation is only effective for followers with the ability for self-direction and this happens mostly at higher hierarchical levels. Therefore, by empowering employees, the leader should guard against delegating to employees with no ability for self-direction.

Exemplary Leadership

Leading by example was a recurring theme, with participants noting how they model the behaviours they expect from their employees. *"I lead by example, I practice what I want to see them do,"* was a common response among the participants. Exemplary leaders can positively influence their followers' performance through their charisma [61]. Well-known exemplary leaders who have inspired change in history are Dr Martin Luther King Junior, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.

DISCUSSION

Empirically, the SL style's strength over other leadership styles presents the assertion that there is no single universally acceptable leadership style for all circumstances [33]. Furthermore, the SL theory is more prescriptive than descriptive and focuses on the development of follower skills and understanding follower attributes in terms of disparities in readiness for self-direction and for taking up greater work responsibilities [33]. The results from the in-depth interviews revealed a common pattern of leadership themes like guiding, coaching, and mentoring employees; with a strong inclination to flexibility, agility, adaptability, and responsiveness in leadership style and behaving according to the situation at hand. The results of the study are consistent with the assertion that in the SL style, the leader responds to the behaviour of the follower and applies a leadership style that is in tandem with the follower development level [25,36].

The four SLT development levels are (1) the subordinate of very low maturity who should benefit from a "telling" style of supervision, (2) the subordinate of moderately low maturity who should benefit from a "selling" style of supervision, (3) the subordinate of moderately high maturity who should benefit from a "participating" style of supervision, and (4) the subordinate of very high maturity who should benefit from a "delegating" style of supervision [33]. A study conducted on the effectiveness of the SL style on military managers in the United States of America posited that the SL style provides a practical approach to assist managers in applying the appropriate telling, selling, participating or delegating leadership styles to effectively support their subordinates [31].

Another study conducted on the influence of SL on employee retention hailed the SL style for its emphasis on employee development needs, thus leading to employee retention and organisational success [61]. Adamska-Chudzińska [60] suggest that motivating employees timeously leads to organisational SS, and timeous intervention comes through the agility and flexibility of the SL style. The positive influence of the SL style on employee motivation and organisational success was further supported by Zahari et al.[24] The findings of this study on the positive influence of the SL style on organisational SS are consistent with the studies

conducted by Adamska-Chudzińska [60] and Wuryani et al.[62], although the aforementioned studies focused on SL and employee motivation.

The findings from the in-depth interviews indicated that the directing, coaching, and supporting styles were the most prominent in this study as these styles work favourably for lower organisational hierarchical levels [57]. It is worth noting that the SLT does not favour one style over another (directing, coaching, supporting or delegating style), but encourages the leader to be flexible enough to select a leadership style that applies to the maturity level of the follower [61]. Furthermore, delegation, though supported in this study, is only effective for followers with the ability for self-direction and this happens mostly at higher hierarchical levels [57]. Mustofa and Muafi [63, p.103] further argued that the SL is most effective when leaders delegate “according to the skills and abilities of their employees”. Although there is a paucity of global studies testing the effectiveness of the SL style on Agrifood SME SS, the limited studies on leadership styles that influence agricultural business success point to the need for a leadership style that responds to fluid situations (Parker et al. [64]. The constantly changing business dynamics require leaders who will manage to direct their followers to effectively manage change.

The results of the study are consistent with the suggestions made by Chirapanda [29], that SMEs do not follow any specific leadership style and studies have revealed different leadership styles in every country, mainly due to both cultural and context differences. The SL theory has been postulated to work more effectively in smaller groups, like an SME setup than in larger corporate set-ups due to its emphasis on individual performance and treating individuals according to the dictates of a particular situation [26]. Additionally, the results of this study indicate the need for the constant presence of leaders to monitor and direct employee performance, an assertion also made by Mustofa and Muafi [63]. Large corporates may not have the time for individualised interactions, making the SL style more favourable to SMEs than large corporates [26]. Additionally, Chaudhary et al. [8], suggest that SMEs have the advantage of quicker decision-making, quicker internal communications, and the ability to adapt to changes in the environment. Zahari et al. [24] likewise support the prior assertion by Chaudhary et al. [8], by suggesting that SMEs tend to be flexible and agile in decision-making and they quickly adapt to changing macro-environmental conditions. In a highly complex and disruptive business world, leadership agility proves to be one of the crucial success factors for SS.

The suitability of the SL style for SME SS lies in its adaptability, as the literature suggests that a leadership style that adapts to challenges is crucial for business survival and continuity [65,66]. An effective leadership style has been studied to be contextual, situational, and adaptive [52]. Aigbogun and Tay [52] further argue that each situation requires its leadership style. Contextual leadership works in a crisis, which could be generalised to the Botswana situation because the 2021 importation ban of certain agricultural goods called for farmers to devise innovative ways to increase productivity and boost their farming methods [67].

The results of the study further reveal that competitiveness does not have a positive moderating effect on the relationship between SL and SS. This can be explained by a study conducted by Temtime [67] and is still relevant today, which revealed that SMEs in Botswana do not offer competitive products due to a lack of strategic vision and innovation among the

owners. Leaders of SMEs in Botswana need to move from inefficient day-to-day situational planning and develop long-term goals and strategies that promote competitiveness [67].

The results of the study also indicated that access to Government support does not have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between SL and SS. This can be explained by the suggestion access to GS does not translate to farming success and sustainability, as farmers continue to struggle financially [27]. Farmers do not fully utilise available financiers, indicating that access to financial aid proves to be a cumbersome process [27]. The in-depth interview results also revealed the assertion by Bosekeng [27] that access to GS is a cumbersome process for some farmers. Therefore, the findings from the qualitative study are consistent with the findings from the quantitative study, which revealed that the SL style positively influences the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The specific themes derived from the in-depth interviews, which are indicative of the preferred leadership styles were discussed under in this study. These themes are leadership flexibility, adaptability, agility, responding according to the dictates of the situation, coaching, mentorship, empowerment through employee training and development, and exemplary leadership.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by the fact that a Google Scholar search yielded no results on previous studies that focused on leadership styles that influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. This limitation reduces the generalisability of this study to Sectors other than the Agrifood Sector. However, this limitation does not necessarily affect the validity of the study because the research findings can be generalised to other SMEs since SMEs tend to suffer similar survival and sustainability issues.

Another limitation was the focus on leaders as units of analysis and not getting follower perceptions of their leaders. Therefore, the responses of the leaders could have reflected the leader's intentions. Another limitation is limited research on the SL styles. This research will enhance research on the SL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study only focused on the SL Leadership styles and SS of the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. For future research, the influence of other leadership styles on SME survival and sustainability in Botswana could be considered. Furthermore, this study focused on leaders, not followers and there is a likelihood that leaders reported their intentions as opposed to the actual leadership styles. Future studies could focus on followers, to understand the follower perception of their leaders.

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP STYLES THAT INFLUENCE THE SURVIVAL AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SMES IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR IN BOTSWANA

The main objective of this study was to develop a framework for the leadership styles that influence the survival and sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The study revealed that all the facets of the SL style positively influence the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana. The framework, as depicted in Figure 1, presents the emerging leadership constructs of mentorship, coaching, flexible, responsive, agile, adaptable, empowering, and exemplary leadership. These leadership styles positively lead to survival and sustainability

indicators, namely new markets, new product lines, innovative farming methods, succession planning and grooming, improved farming techniques, adoption of modern technology, conservation agriculture, and product quality enhancement. The leadership styles will eventually lead to the SS of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana and SS is defined as long-term survival, long-term sustainability, SME longevity, and SME growth.

Figure c below presents a visual representation of the framework for leadership styles that influence Botswana Agrifood Sector SMEs. This framework is the contribution to this study.

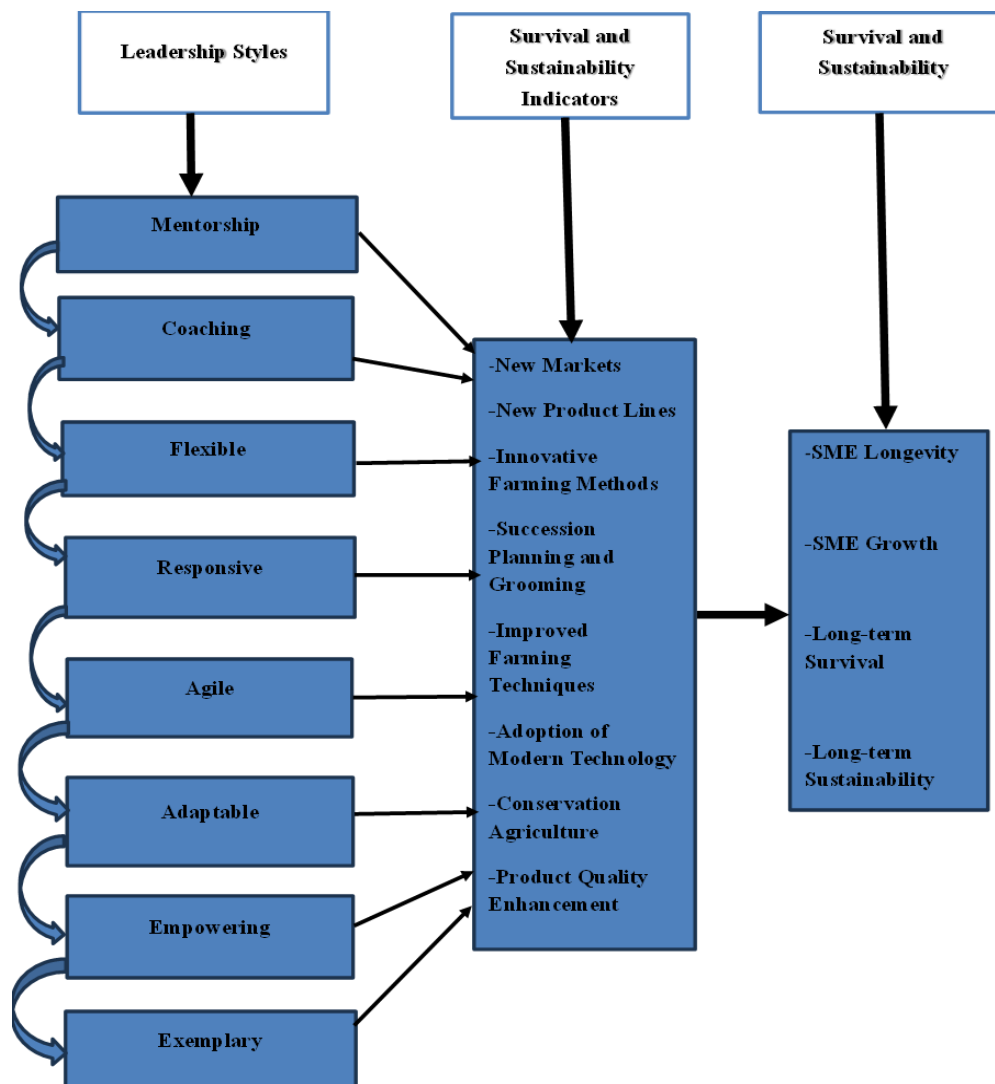


Figure 3: A Framework for Leadership Styles that Influence the Survival and Sustainability of SMEs in the Agrifood Sector in Botswana

Source: Author's own (Developed from the study findings)

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of the SL style in ensuring the survival and sustainability (SS) of SMEs lies in its adaptability. Research suggests that leadership styles capable of adjusting to challenges are essential for business continuity and long-term success (Okeke et al; Gupta et al [65-66] hence the Situational Leadership framework developed in this study.

Studies have shown that effective leadership is contextual, situational, and adaptive [52]. Aigbogun and Tay [52] further emphasise that different situations require distinct leadership approaches. Contextual leadership, for instance, is particularly effective during a crisis. This concept is relevant to Botswana's agrifood sector, where the 2021 import ban on certain agricultural products forced farmers to adopt innovative strategies to enhance productivity and improve farming methods [68].

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