

Entrepreneurial Leadership as a Catalyst for Human Resource Development in Resource-Constrained SMEs in Africa: A Zimbabwean Perspective

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Abstract

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in emerging economies face acute resource constraints that preclude the adoption of conventional, formalized Human Resource Development (HRD) models. Drawing on Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and Afrocentric leadership philosophies, this paper develops an integrative conceptual framework explaining how entrepreneurial leadership catalyses HRD in Zimbabwean SMEs. Through a systematic literature synthesis of 85 core sources spanning leadership theory, indigenous African perspectives, and empirical studies of informal learning, the research identifies four leadership functions (adaptive experimentation, social-capital mobilization, emergent structure building, and ubuntu-infused relationality) that give rise to informal HRD mechanisms such as experiential learning cycles, peer coaching, problem-solving forums, and narrative exchange. These processes generate distributed learning capacity, adaptive competence, and cultural–structural alignment, offering a robust alternative to Western paradigms of formal training and hierarchical development. The framework not only underscores the cultural authenticity and resource efficiency of emergent HRD in resource-scarce contexts but also provides actionable insights for SME owner-managers and policymakers. The paper concludes by proposing a mixed-methods empirical validation of the model combining structured surveys with in-depth interviews to test its propositions and refine its constructs, thereby advancing both scholarly understanding and practical pathways for sustainable SME growth in Zimbabwe and similar emerging economies.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Leadership; HRD; SMEs

Introduction

Human Resource Development (HRD) is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone for enhancing organizational performance, fostering innovation, and ensuring long-term sustainability (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). In Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), particularly within emerging economies such as Zimbabwe, the importance of HRD is magnified by the sector's potential to drive economic growth, alleviate poverty, and generate employment (Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2020; Etuk et al., 2014). Notwithstanding this, many SMEs operating in resource-constrained environments struggle to operationalise HRD practices due to limited financial and infrastructural resources, insufficient training facilities, and weak institutional support (Nolan & Harney, 2024; Purgał-Popiela, 2024).

Furthermore, in Zimbabwe, the SME landscape is dominated by informal enterprises that often lack structured HR departments or standardized training programs (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2021; Purgał-Popiela, 2024), which further complicates HRD efforts in the firms. As a result, employees frequently lack the skills and competencies necessary to respond to evolving market demands, constraining both organizational growth and wider economic competitiveness in the region.

Despite these challenges, Zimbabwean SMEs exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability. This resilience is frequently attributed to the entrepreneurial leadership of owner-managers, who navigate constraints through innovation, proactiveness, and calculated risk-taking (Mashavira et al., 2021; Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2021; Purgał-Popiela, 2024). In many cases, leadership in Zimbabwean enterprises is also informed by indigenous philosophies, most notably the concept of ubuntu, which emphasizes communal relationships, mutual respect, and collective well-being (Nemashakwe et al., 2022; Nleya, 2020). When integrated into organizational practices, ubuntu nurtures a relational leadership approach whereby owner-managers prioritize mentorship, knowledge sharing, and employee empowerment even in the absence of formal HR structures (Nemashakwe et al., 2022). Similarly, the Afrocentric Effective Leadership (AEL) model highlights the need to align leadership styles with African cultural values to boost organizational effectiveness in SMEs (Nemashakwe et al., 2023). Together, these culturally grounded leadership frameworks offer adaptive strategies that compensate for the lack of formal HRD mechanisms, fostering a supportive culture of continuous learning and innovation.

By illuminating these adaptive leadership practices, this paper explores the intersection between entrepreneurial leadership and HRD in resource-constrained SMEs across emerging economies, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe. Drawing on literature from both Human Resource Management and entrepreneurship, the study develops a conceptual framework that explains the concept of HRD from the perspective of resource-constrained economies like Zimbabwe. In short, this paper seeks to pursue three specific objectives:

1. *Investigate how entrepreneurial leadership behaviours in Zimbabwean SMEs give rise to informal HRD mechanisms.*
2. *Develop an integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes Complexity Leadership Theory with Afrocentric leadership models to explain HRD practices and processes in SMEs in Zimbabwe and similar emerging economies.*
3. *Derive actionable recommendations for practitioners and policymakers aimed at nurturing resilient, culturally congruent HRD practices in SMEs across Zimbabwe and similar emerging economies.*

By pursuing these objectives, this study seeks to delineate a context-sensitive approach to HRD that departs from imported, Westernised training paradigms and offers both a novel scholarly contribution and practical guidance for resource-scarce settings like Zimbabwe.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach, guided by the PRISMA framework, to develop and substantiate a conceptual model linking entrepreneurial leadership to HRD in resource-constrained SMEs in Zimbabwe. The review aims to synthesize existing knowledge on (1) complexity leadership theory (CLT) and distributed leadership, (2) Afrocentric leadership philosophies, and (3) informal HRD mechanisms within SMEs, particularly in Southern Africa.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive search was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators such as: “entrepreneurial leadership” AND “HRD” AND “SMEs” AND “Zimbabwe”, “Afrocentric leadership”, “informal learning”, and “resource-constrained”. Searches were limited to publications between January 2000 and December 2024 to ensure relevance and currency.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria were defined to capture both empirical and theoretical contributions that address leadership and HRD in SMEs within African or comparable emerging-economy contexts. Specifically, studies were included if they:

- Were published in peer-reviewed journals, books, or reputable reports.
- Focused on leadership models relevant to SMEs.
- Discussed HRD practices, especially informal mechanisms.
- Were written in English.

Exclusion criteria eliminated:

- Studies focused exclusively on large corporations or formal HR departments.
- Non-English publications.
- Conference abstracts without full-text availability.
- Screening and Selection Process

The initial search yielded 312 records. After removing duplicates, 278 unique records remained. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, resulting in 142 articles for full-text review. Following detailed evaluation against the inclusion criteria, 85 core sources were retained for synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Key data were extracted using a structured coding sheet capturing publication type, context, leadership model, HRD mechanisms, and relevance to Zimbabwean SMEs. Thematic synthesis was employed to identify recurring patterns and conceptual linkages. Findings informed the development of a conceptual framework that positions entrepreneurial leadership as a catalyst for HRD in resource-constrained environments.

Analytic Approach

The thematic coding process was used to extract and categorize concepts related to leadership functions (adaptive, enabling, administrative), Afrocentric values, and HRD practices (experiential learning, peer coaching, etc.). Through iterative comparison, the researchers identified points of theoretical convergence and cultural specificity, which informed the integrative CLT–Ubuntu model.

Future Empirical Validation

While this study focuses on conceptual development, the framework is explicitly designed to guide subsequent empirical validation. Planned follow-on research will employ mixed-methods field studies, surveys, and in-depth interviews with Zimbabwean SME owner-managers and employees to test the model's propositions and refine its constructs.

HRD in emerging economies

Human Resource Development (HRD) serves as a crucial driver for organizational performance, innovation, and sustainability across global enterprises (Armstrong, 2014). However, in emerging economies, the application of conventional Western HRD models often clashes with local realities characterized by informal economies, limited infrastructure, and distinct cultural norms (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2019; Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2020). As a result, SMEs in Zimbabwe and in other emerging economies frequently bypass formal HRD frameworks in favour of contextually relevant, resource-efficient approaches (Nemashakwe et al., 2023).

Instead, in emerging economies, SMEs tend to rely on non-formal learning strategies to build workforce capabilities, particularly where formal training infrastructure is limited or unaffordable (Matsongoni & Mutambara, 2018; Purgał-Popieła, 2024). These strategies are deeply embedded in local cultural practices and economic realities, offering adaptive and cost-effective alternatives to traditional HRD models. Tshuma et al. (2021) report that experiential learning is a prominent approach, especially in rural family-owned enterprises in Malawi and Zimbabwe, where employees acquire skills through hands-on problem-solving, trial-and-error, and reflective practice integrated into their daily work operations. This form of learning is not only practical but also aligns with indigenous knowledge systems that prioritize learning by doing.

Mentorship and peer coaching also play a vital role in workforce development within SMEs in emerging economies. In Zambia, for instance, over time, informal mentorship has been institutionalized to facilitate real-time knowledge transfer and business skill development. This form of mentorship, documented by DSIK (2023), emphasizes the value of tacit knowledge sharing, resilience-building, and entrepreneurial guidance in resource-constrained environments. Such informal, context-sensitive learning mechanisms are particularly effective

where formal HR structures are lacking. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, entrepreneurial leaders often function as on-the-job coaches, guiding employees through complex tasks and fostering a culture of collective learning (Tinarwo, 2016). These mentorship practices not only reinforce organizational memory but also align with communal values and indigenous knowledge systems that prioritize experiential and relational learning in developing human capital in SMEs.

Another innovative approach to workforce development in SMEs operating in resource-constrained economies is the use of collaborative learning strategies such as action learning. For instance, Zulu-Chisanga et al. (2023) highlight how African SMEs, particularly in South Africa, foster resilience and sustainability through participatory learning and peer collaboration, which align with indigenous communal values and the ethos of Ubuntu philosophy. These practices are not only culturally congruent but also practical in environments where formal training infrastructure is lacking (Nleya, 2020). Moreover, such approaches reflect a broader trend in African HRD, where socio-cultural dynamics, resource constraints, and the need for adaptive learning models shape how skills are developed and transferred (Zulu-Chisanga et al., 2023).

Constraints to Human Resource Development in Zimbabwean SMEs

Human Resource Development (HRD) within Zimbabwe's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is significantly constrained by a constellation of structural and contextual challenges. These challenges are deeply embedded in the country's socio-economic and political landscape, and they collectively hinder the institutionalization of formal HRD systems. Chief among these constraints is the persistent lack of financial capital. Zimbabwean SMEs typically operate with limited working capital and face considerable barriers to accessing affordable credit, largely due to perceptions of high risk and inadequate collateral (Canuto et al., 2024). This financial fragility restricts their ability to invest in structured training programs, career development pathways, or knowledge management systems.

Compounding the financial limitations is the high rate of employee turnover, particularly among skilled and semi-skilled workers. The phenomenon of skills flight continues to erode the talent base of SMEs, as employees often migrate to larger corporations, non-governmental organizations, or international markets in pursuit of better remuneration and career prospects

(Nyoni & Bonga, 2018). This transient workforce undermines the sustainability of HRD investments, as firms are unable to retain the human capital they develop. Likewise, infrastructural deficits, including unreliable electricity and water supply, as well as bureaucratic inefficiencies, further constrain operational capacity and limit the feasibility of formal HRD initiatives in SMEs in emerging economies (Muzari & Jambwa, 2014; Matsongoni & Mutambara, 2018).

In response to these systemic barriers, many SMEs adopt informal and adaptive HRD strategies. Entrepreneurial leadership has emerged as a critical enabler in this regard. SME owner-managers often compensate for the absence of formal HR structures by fostering flexible, culturally grounded learning environments. Drawing on indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, these leaders promote mentorship, experiential learning, and peer coaching as viable alternatives to conventional HRD mechanisms (Nemashakwe et al., 2023). Such approaches not only build internal capacity but also reflect a broader shift toward context-sensitive HRD models that are aligned with the socio-economic realities of Zimbabwe's SME sector.

Role of Entrepreneurial Leadership

Entrepreneurial leadership, which is characterized by innovation, adaptability, and a proactive mindset, has emerged as a critical factor in navigating the complexities of resource-constrained environments (Abdalla & Nakagawa, 2022). In Zimbabwean SMEs, entrepreneurial leaders often compensate for the lack of formal HR structures by fostering a culture of continuous learning, mentorship, and employee empowerment.

Therefore, what is emerging in this study so far is the realisation that, in resource-constrained SMEs, the success of HRD efforts depends largely on the ability of SME entrepreneurs to pivot informal HRD efforts. Their ability to innovate and improvise enables rapid adaptation to volatile market conditions, while their leadership style, which is often grounded in culturally embedded philosophies such as Ubuntu. The integration of ubuntu into leadership practices fosters a relational approach, where leaders prioritize employee development, mentorship, and knowledge sharing, even in the absence of formal HR structures (Nemashakwe et al., 2023). Nemashakwe et al., (2023) highlight the importance of Afrocentric leadership models that incorporate cultural values and the philosophy of ubuntu, emphasizing community, shared purpose, and relational leadership. The Afrocentric Effective Leadership (AEL) model they

propose underscores the significance of aligning leadership practices with African cultural values to enhance organizational effectiveness in SMEs. Therefore, SME owner/managers in emerging economies like Zimbabwe do more than manage operations as they instead actively shape learning environments in their firms to compensate for the absence of formal HR infrastructure. This culturally grounded leadership style not only compensates for the lack of formal HRD mechanisms but also cultivates a supportive organizational culture that encourages continuous learning and innovation.

In Zimbabwe, for example, Mashavira (2022) found evidence of owner-managers leveraging their social capital and personal networks to facilitate experiential learning, encourage peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, and establish informal problem-solving forums. These practices represent a pragmatic and contextually grounded approach to HRD, one that aligns with the realities of operating in resource-constrained environments where formal HR structures are often absent. In conclusion, the informal approach to HRD in resource-constrained SMEs in Zimbabwe and beyond is not a merely reactive stopgap measure. Instead, it represents strategic, culturally attuned responses to systemic resource limitations. These practices reflect a broader shift toward context-sensitive HRD models that align with indigenous values and the socio-economic realities of emerging economies.

In summary, the evidence presented underscores that, in Zimbabwe's resource-constrained SMEs, entrepreneurial leadership is not an adjunct to HRD but is an enabler. By leveraging innovation, improvisation, and culturally embedded philosophies such as ubuntu, SME owner-managers construct informal yet highly effective learning ecosystems that substitute for absent formal HR structures (Mashavira et al., 2019). These context-sensitive practices not only cultivate critical skills and competencies but also foster resilient organizational cultures characterized by trust, collective responsibility, and continuous innovation. As such, they exemplify a broader paradigm shift in emerging economies away from imported, one-size-fits-all HRD models toward adaptive frameworks grounded in indigenous values and socio-economic realities.

Building on this empirical foundation, the next section of this paper turns to the development of a theoretical framework that integrates Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) with Afrocentric leadership principles, particularly ubuntu. CLT's emphasis on dynamic interaction, emergent learning, and system interdependencies complements Ubuntu's focus on relationality

and communal well-being, offering a robust lens through which to understand and support the informal HRD architectures that thrive within resource-scarce SMEs.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and Afrocentric leadership models to develop a nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership catalyses Human Resource Development (HRD) in resource-constrained African SMEs. These theoretical lenses are particularly relevant in the African SME context, where uncertainty, informality, and cultural embeddedness influence both leadership behaviour and HRD outcomes.

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT)

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) offers a dynamic lens through which entrepreneurial leadership in resource-constrained SMEs can be understood. Rather than viewing leadership as a hierarchical, top-down function, CLT conceptualizes it as an emergent phenomenon arising from interactions within complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007). This perspective is particularly relevant to SMEs in Zimbabwe, where formal structures are often limited, and leadership must adapt fluidly to environmental uncertainty and resource scarcity.

CLT identifies three interdependent leadership functions that are essential for fostering innovation, learning, and organizational adaptability:

Adaptive Leadership

This function is central to entrepreneurial leadership in SMEs. It involves fostering experimentation, informal learning, and innovation—often at the organizational periphery. In the Zimbabwean SME context, adaptive leadership manifests through owner-managers who encourage initiative-taking and problem-solving despite limited formal HRD infrastructure.

Administrative Leadership

While SMEs may lack extensive bureaucratic systems, administrative leadership still plays a critical role in providing minimal structure, resource allocation, and operational stability. In resource-constrained environments, this function may be informal but is vital for sustaining core business activities and enabling HRD efforts.

Enabling Leadership

This bridging function facilitates the integration of adaptive initiatives with administrative systems. It supports knowledge flow, sense-making, and the translation of emergent practices into sustainable routines. In Zimbabwean SMEs, enabling leadership is often exercised by entrepreneurial leaders who mediate between informal learning processes and the need for strategic coherence.

By applying CLT to the Zimbabwean SME context, this study positions entrepreneurial leadership as a catalytic force that enables HRD not through formal programs, but through emergent, context-sensitive practices. The theory's emphasis on interaction, emergence, and distributed agency aligns with the realities of SMEs operating under resource constraints, where leadership is often enacted through informal networks and improvisational strategies.

In Zimbabwean SMEs, where formal HR departments and structured training budgets are often absent due to economic instability and resource scarcity, entrepreneurial leaders frequently assume HRD functions informally. These leaders foster learning and adaptability through trial-and-error initiatives, cross-functional teamwork, and rapid feedback loops, enabling employees to develop skills organically in response to shifting market demands. This informal approach aligns with the principles of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), which emphasizes decentralized, adaptive leadership in dynamic environments (Goldstein et al., 2010). In the Zimbabwean context, such leadership is particularly vital, as SMEs operate under persistent economic volatility, currency fluctuations, and limited institutional support. Rather than enforcing rigid procedures, entrepreneurial leaders in Zimbabwe create "safe-to-fail" environments that encourage experimentation, peer learning, and the sharing of tacit knowledge across informal networks. These emergent HRD practices contribute to organizational resilience and sustainability, even in the face of severe constraints (Chinomona & Pretorius, 2011).

Afrocentric Leadership Models

Afrocentric leadership perspectives grounded in indigenous African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, emphasize community, reciprocity, and relational accountability. Ubuntu, foregrounds mutual respect, empathy, and collective well-being (Mugumbate & Naami, 2023). Building on these philosophies, models such as the Afrocentric Effective Leadership (AEL) framework (Nkomo, 2011) and the Ubuntu-based leadership constructs of Mbigi and Maree (2005) propose that African leaders:

- Mentor through example, sharing both successes and failures.
- Co-create organizational norms via inclusive dialogue and consensus.
- Nurture individual and collective potential by embedding development within everyday interactions.

In the context of Zimbabwean SMEs, these Afrocentric behaviours translate into on-the-job coaching, communal problem-solving circles, and storytelling forums that leverage local narratives and social capital (Muzari & Jambwa, 2014). By integrating indigenous knowledge systems, Afrocentric leadership not only preserves cultural identity but also delivers practical, low-cost pathways for employee development.

Integrative Perspective: CLT × Ubuntu

By weaving together CLT's focus on emergent learning with Afrocentric emphases on relationality and communal values, our framework captures the dual imperatives facing African SME leaders: to enable adaptive innovation while remaining culturally authentic.

- **Adaptive + Ubuntu:** SME owner-managers sanction micro-experiments such as rotating team roles and foreground collective reflection, spawning experiential learning cycles that build employee agility.
- **Enabling + Ubuntu:** SME owner-managers may create "Ubuntu circles" and mentorship networks that translate individual insights into shared practices, constituting informal HRD scaffolding that spans the enterprise.
- **Administrative + Ubuntu:** SME owner-managers can craft codes of conduct and peer-coaching templates rooted in emerging HRD methods in communal norms, ensuring both consistency and cultural legitimacy.

Under this integrative lens, HRD in resource-scarce SMEs becomes less about formal programs and more about systemically harnessing social capital, distributed leadership, and indigenous wisdom to cultivate resilient human capital. In the following section, we operationalize this CLT–Ubuntu model, defining its core constructs, hypothesized relationships, and propositions to guide empirical examination and practical application in Zimbabwean and broader African SME contexts.

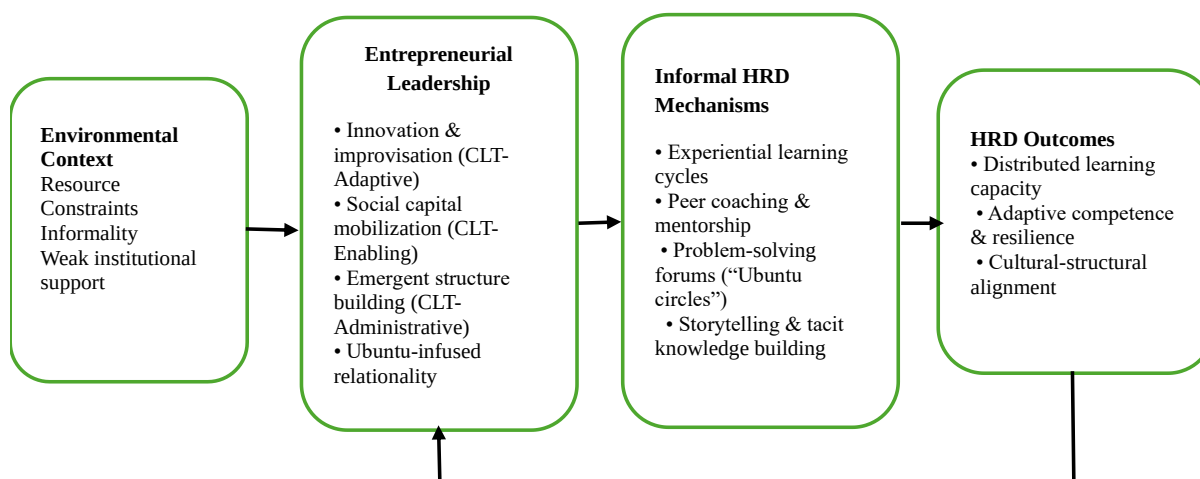


Figure 1: HRD systems in SMEs

The proposed conceptual model begins with the environmental context in which Zimbabwean SMEs operate. Chronic resource scarcity, weak institutional support, and highly informal market structures render conventional HRD departments and standardized training programs impractical (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2021; World Bank, 2019). Under these conditions, firms cannot allocate dedicated budgets to formal learning, nor can they rely on established accreditation bodies to legitimize employee development. Instead, they must innovate within the constraints of their immediate environment.

At the heart of the model lies entrepreneurial leadership, reconceived through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and Afrocentric philosophies. Adaptively, owner–managers sponsor “micro-experiments” or safe-to-fail initiatives that generate novel practices and accelerate on-the-job learning (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Goldstein et al., 2010). Enabling leadership manifests as the strategic mobilization of social capital, leveraging personal networks, community ties, and informal affiliations to disseminate emergent lessons throughout the firm (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Administratively, these leaders do not institute formal policies; rather, they allow emergent structures, shared routines, and unwritten codes grounded in common values to coalesce organically, thereby stabilizing best practices (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Underpinning all three CLT dimensions is ubuntu relationality, whereby decisions and learning processes are guided by communal well-being, mutual respect, and reciprocal obligation (Nkomo, 2011; Nemashakwe et al., 2023).

These entrepreneurial leadership behaviours give rise to four informal HRD mechanisms. First, experiential learning cycles transform daily operations into living classrooms, as employees

learn by doing, reflect on outcomes, and iterate continuously (Muzari & Jambwa, 2014). Secondly, peer coaching and mentorship emerge naturally, as more experienced workers guide newcomers through complex tasks and share tacit knowledge (Nzonzo & Chipunza, 2016). Thirdly, problem-solving forums or “ubuntu circles” convene staff around real-time challenges, fostering collective intelligence and co-creation of solutions (Mashavira et al., 2021). Finally, storytelling and narrative exchange enable the preservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge, further embedding learning within the firm’s cultural fabric (Nkomo, 2011). Collectively, these mechanisms produce three interrelated HRD outcomes. Distributed learning capacity arises as every employee assumes both learner and teacher roles, democratizing knowledge creation and retention (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Adaptive competence ensures that teams can rapidly reconfigure skills in response to market volatility, embodying the agility prized in entrepreneurial leadership (Gupta, MacMillan & Surie, 2004). Finally, cultural alignment occurs when HRD practices derive legitimacy from their resonance with indigenous values and communal norms rather than from external accreditation (Nemashakwe et al., 2023; Nleya, 2020). In sum, this model illustrates how entrepreneurial leadership functions as the catalyst for a contextually grounded, resource-efficient form of HRD that contrasts sharply with Western paradigms of formal training and hierarchical development systems as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Difference between Western and Zimbabwe HRD processes in SMEs

Aspect	Western HRD	Zimbabwean SME Model
Structure	Centralized HR department; formal curricula	Distributed, emergent learning embedded in daily work
Process	Pre-designed training programs; competency frameworks	Trial-and-error projects; “safe-to-fail” experiments
Orientation	Individual achievement, career-path planning	Collective growth, communal well-being (ubuntu)
Knowledge Flow	Top-down dissemination; standardized materials	Peer-to-peer exchange; tacit knowledge via storytelling
Legitimacy	Legitimized by external accreditation and benchmarks	Legitimized by cultural consonance and social endorsement

According to Table 1, where Western models treat HRD as a series of discrete interventions delivered by specialists, the Zimbabwean SME model reconceives leadership and development

as a single, fluid process driven by entrepreneurial leaders who cultivate emergent, relational learning environments that are both resource-wise and culturally authentic.

In conclusion, the conceptual model proposed in this paper underscores that entrepreneurial leadership in African SMEs is not merely a business function but a developmental strategy. Through culturally embedded, informal HRD mechanisms, entrepreneurial leaders enhance organisational learning, build employee capacity, and foster resilience, demonstrating that even under severe constraints, meaningful human capital development is achievable when leadership is contextually adaptive and culturally grounded.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyses the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership behaviours and HRD outcomes, as outlined in the proposed conceptual model. The discussion contextualizes the findings in light of Zimbabwe's specific challenges, cultural values, and institutional dynamics, while drawing on existing literature to provide a critical reflection of how leadership practices in SMEs can address HRD limitations.

Entrepreneurial Leadership and HRD in Zimbabwean SMEs

Entrepreneurial leadership, characterized by innovation, adaptability, and relational leadership, is vital for driving HRD in Zimbabwe's resource-constrained SMEs. As Nyamubarwa and Chipunza (2019) argue, HRD models in Zimbabwean SMEs must move beyond Western-centric frameworks that rely heavily on formalized training and development systems. Instead, entrepreneurial leadership behaviours allow SMEs to adopt flexible, informal mechanisms of employee development that are culturally aligned and financially viable. In environments where formal training programs are not feasible due to budget constraints, leaders often rely on innovative practices such as on-the-job learning, peer mentoring, and experiential development.

This study also reveals that innovation in leadership is a key feature of entrepreneurial leadership in Zimbabwean SMEs, as owner-managers are often required to think creatively and find new solutions to existing problems without external resources. Chazuza and Mpofu (2025) highlight how SME leaders in Zimbabwe often prioritize resourcefulness, improvisation, and frugality, adapting existing knowledge and practices to suit their unique context. By fostering innovation, entrepreneurial leaders encourage employees to continuously learn and develop in

ways that are aligned with the dynamic needs of the business environment. This approach is particularly critical in sectors where employee skills are continually evolving, and adaptability is necessary to survive in a volatile economy.

Additionally, adaptability allows leaders to respond to changes in the economic or regulatory landscape, such as policy shifts or economic crises. Nemashakwe et al. (2023) stress that Zimbabwean SME leaders frequently face political and economic uncertainty, which requires agile leadership that can pivot business strategies quickly while fostering employee engagement and resilience. Through this adaptability, SME leaders can create a learning culture where employees continuously develop their skills to match the changing demands of the organization.

Relational leadership is another essential dimension in Zimbabwean SMEs, as it promotes a culture of mutual support, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Leaders who demonstrate relational leadership prioritize employee well-being and trust-building, ensuring that HRD processes are aligned with local values of Ubuntu. Tarambiwa (2021) argues that the ubuntu philosophy is integral to Zimbabwean organizational life, as it fosters community, empathy, and shared goals. In the SME context, leaders who embrace ubuntu tend to develop stronger relationships with their employees, which enhances motivation and retention, key HRD outcomes in resource-constrained environments like Zimbabwe.

Informal HRD Mechanisms and Cultural Alignment

The model also emphasizes informal HRD mechanisms as a critical strategy for fostering employee development in SMEs. Mentorship, experiential learning, and knowledge-sharing are essential practices that contribute to HRD outcomes in the absence of formal systems. These mechanisms are particularly valuable in Zimbabwe, where SMEs often lack the financial resources to invest in formal training programs or hire dedicated HR personnel. Masamba et al., (2024) highlights the prevalence of mentorship in Zimbabwean SMEs, where business owners and senior employees often play a significant role in guiding younger staff through informal learning channels. These mentorship relationships are vital in transferring tacit knowledge and skills that are difficult to codify in formal training programs.

Experiential learning is another informal mechanism commonly used in Zimbabwean SMEs. Employees are often allowed to learn by doing, which fosters hands-on experience and

practical skills. This approach aligns with Kolb, 2014) experiential learning theory, which asserts that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. In the context of Zimbabwe's SMEs, experiential learning enables employees to learn in real-time, adjusting to the evolving needs of the business.

Additionally, knowledge-sharing is central to entrepreneurial leadership, as it enables employees to exchange ideas, skills, and insights within a collaborative environment. This is particularly important in Zimbabwe, where access to external expertise is limited. Tarambiwa (2021) notes that informal networks and community ties are crucial in enabling resource-sharing and problem-solving in SMEs, particularly when formal knowledge infrastructures are absent.

Cultural and Contextual Influences

The Zimbabwean business context is shaped by a unique set of cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Cultural dimensions, such as collectivism and high-power distance, influence how leadership and HRD are practiced in SMEs. Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural dimensions suggests that in collectivist societies like Zimbabwe, group cohesion and interpersonal relationships are prioritized over individual performance, making relational leadership a particularly effective strategy for HRD. In SMEs, leaders who understand these cultural dimensions can better align their leadership style with employees' needs, fostering an environment conducive to skill development and employee retention (Munyanyi et al., 2018). However, the model also acknowledges the significant constraints faced by SMEs, such as skills flight and political instability, which complicate HRD efforts. In fact, research (Munyanyi et al., 2018; Njanike, 2019) emphasizes that Zimbabwe's SMEs suffer from a high rate of employee turnover, particularly among skilled workers who seek opportunities abroad. In this context, entrepreneurial leadership plays a crucial role in not only developing existing employees but also in retaining talent by creating a supportive and growth-oriented work environment. Relational leadership and mentorship are particularly valuable here, as they help to build loyalty and commitment among employees, reducing turnover rates.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Practical Implications

This study underscores the strategic role of entrepreneurial leadership in addressing the persistent HRD challenges faced by SMEs in Zimbabwe and similar African contexts. Given

the resource constraints and socio-economic uncertainties that characterize these environments, SME leaders must adopt entrepreneurial leadership behaviours such as innovation, adaptability, and relational engagement to foster HRD through culturally grounded and informal means.

Firstly, owner-managers should intentionally integrate cultural values such as ubuntu, which emphasizes community, empathy, and mutual responsibility into everyday leadership and learning practices. This approach fosters relational trust, knowledge sharing, and emotional commitment among employees, thereby mitigating issues such as high staff turnover and low morale.

Secondly, informal HRD mechanisms such as mentorship, peer learning, and experiential development should be formally recognized and systematically supported within SME operations. Rather than relying solely on external training or formal HR departments (which may be financially unfeasible), leaders should cultivate internal learning environments that are flexible, context-sensitive, and embedded in daily business practices.

Furthermore, capacity-building interventions should be designed to strengthen entrepreneurial leadership capabilities among SME owner-managers. Business support organizations, incubators, and development agencies should offer targeted workshops that focus not only on technical business skills but also on soft leadership competencies such as emotional intelligence, adaptive thinking, and inclusive decision-making—tailored to the local cultural milieu.

Policy Implications

The findings of this research also carry significant implications for public policy and development programming in Zimbabwe and across sub-Saharan Africa. To create an enabling ecosystem for SME growth and HRD, policymakers must go beyond generic capacity-building initiatives and engage with the cultural and contextual realities of local business environments. Firstly, there is an urgent need for policy frameworks that formally recognize and support indigenous and Afrocentric leadership models. This includes integrating values such as ubuntu, collective accountability, and participative governance into national HRD strategies and entrepreneurship development programs. By doing so, policies will be more likely to resonate with and be adopted by local SME stakeholders.

Secondly, governments and development partners should facilitate access to financial, technical, and institutional resources that support entrepreneurial leadership development. This could involve the provision of leadership development grants for SMEs, subsidized training on informal HRD methods, or partnerships with universities and NGOs to deliver culturally relevant leadership programs.

In addition, national SME policies should promote the establishment of networks and platforms that enable SME leaders to share knowledge, mentor each other, and co-develop HRD solutions rooted in their lived experiences. Supporting local business associations and cooperative networks can foster peer-led learning, helping to overcome isolation and institutional weaknesses.

Finally, labour and education ministries should collaborate to align vocational and entrepreneurial training with the realities of informal HRD practices within SMEs. By embedding entrepreneurial leadership principles in education policy and curriculum design, future business leaders will be better equipped to drive HRD innovations that reflect both global insights and local wisdom.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the theoretical intersection between entrepreneurial leadership and Human Resource Development (HRD) in resource-constrained SMEs in Zimbabwe, particularly focusing on how entrepreneurial leadership behaviours can foster employee development without formal HRD systems. The study presented a conceptual model that integrates complexity leadership theory and Afrocentric leadership models, which together emphasize the adaptability, innovation, and relational leadership that is often seen in African SMEs.

The findings suggest that, in the context of Zimbabwean SMEs, entrepreneurial leaders who embrace cultural values such as ubuntu and who prioritize informal HRD practices—such as mentorship, experiential learning, and knowledge sharing—are well-positioned to overcome the barriers posed by limited financial resources, high turnover, and political or economic instability. These leaders are able to create environments conducive to employee development

by improvising solutions and leveraging informal networks that are aligned with local cultural values and communal practices.

The discussion has emphasized the critical role of indigenous leadership models in enhancing HRD outcomes in African SMEs, suggesting that these models not only offer a culturally appropriate response to HRD challenges but also serve as an essential mechanism for improving organizational performance and employee retention. While formal HRD systems are often lacking, entrepreneurial leadership behaviours that are rooted in community-oriented leadership practices can compensate for this deficit, fostering an environment where employees are continuously developed through adaptive and resourceful means.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature that advocates for the need to contextualize HRD practices within the African context, taking into account the unique economic, cultural, and social dynamics of SMEs in Africa. By focusing on Zimbabwe, this study highlights the role of entrepreneurial leadership in driving HRD outcomes even in the face of significant resource constraints.

Recommendations

Based on the insights derived from the analysis and discussion, the following recommendations are made for both SME leaders and policymakers in Zimbabwe:

Practical Recommendations for SME Leaders

1. **Embrace Entrepreneurial Leadership Practices:** SME leaders should cultivate entrepreneurial leadership behaviours that emphasize innovation, adaptability, and relational leadership. These behaviours align with the cultural values of the communities in which these SMEs operate, fostering trust, collaboration, and resilience.
2. **Leverage Informal HRD Mechanisms:** Given the lack of formal HRD systems, SME leaders should focus on leveraging informal learning opportunities. Mentorship programs, knowledge-sharing platforms, and experiential learning initiatives can provide significant developmental opportunities without requiring substantial financial investment.
3. **Create Culturally Relevant Training Programs:** Training programs should be tailored to the local context and cultural values, incorporating aspects of ubuntu and community-based learning. These programs can enhance employee engagement and retention, ensuring that the workforce is not only skilled but also motivated to contribute to the success of the organization.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Support for Indigenous Leadership Models:** Policymakers should prioritize the promotion of indigenous leadership models that align with the values and practices of local communities. This would involve supporting training programs that focus on building entrepreneurial leadership skills among SME leaders.
2. **Facilitate Access to Resources:** Given the resource constraints faced by SMEs in Zimbabwe, there is a need for policies that provide financial and logistical support for HRD initiatives. Government support could include funding for leadership development programs or incentives for SMEs that invest in their employees' skills development.
3. **Create Networking and Mentorship Opportunities:** Policymakers should work to foster networks that connect SME leaders with potential mentors, knowledge-sharing platforms, and professional development resources. These networks can facilitate the exchange of ideas and best practices, further enhancing the HRD capacity of SMEs.

This paper makes a distinctive contribution by articulating how entrepreneurial leadership framed through Complexity Leadership Theory and Afrocentric principles, such as ubuntu, serves as the critical engine driving Human Resource Development in resource-constrained SMEs. By shifting the focus from imported, formal training paradigms to emergent, culturally grounded learning processes, our model highlights the synergistic interplay of adaptive experimentation, social-capital mobilization, and relational stewardship in cultivating resilient human capital. Looking forward, the next imperative is to empirically test and refine this framework in Zimbabwean SMEs through mixed-methods field research. We recommend deploying structured surveys to measure the prevalence and impact of the identified leadership-HRD mechanisms, complemented by in-depth interviews to capture contextual nuances and validate the model's propositions. Such empirical validation will both strengthen theoretical rigor and offer practical guidance for leaders and policymakers committed to sustainable SME development

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