

THE ROLE OF TOP LEVEL MANAGEMENT IN SUPPLY CHAIN PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY OF MERU TOWN, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Supply chain management (SCM) has been discussed by researchers as well as business practitioners for more than two decades now but still surprisingly, little can be seen in today's business practices. One important enabler for taking the SCM philosophy from theory into practice that is often mentioned but not investigated in-depth is top management support. The role top management plays in a company's supply chain practices could be an important piece of research that is not yet in place in the big SCM puzzle. Supply chain management is an essential element to operational efficiency. SCM can be applied to customer satisfaction and customer success. Despite the often stated importance of SCM, little about top management role in SMC practices is known. Organizations increasingly find that they must rely on effective supply chains or networks to successfully compete in the global market and networked economy. In new management paradigms, this concept of business relationships extends beyond traditional enterprise boundaries and seeks to organize entire business processes throughout a value chain of numerous organizations. The purpose of this research was therefore to explore the role of top level management in various companies that successfully utilize opportunities given by SCM practices in the dynamic business environment. Data was collected from twenty different companies where a total of thirty five top level managers responded to the questionnaire and their responses are a basis of this research. The major finding was that top level management's involvement in supply chain improves its performance. The study therefore recommends that top level managers should have a hand in the development of supply chains to propel its performance above that of competitors by adopting best practices in SCM.

Key Words: Top management; Supply chain management; Role; Performance; Logistics

1 Introduction

During the last two decades a trend towards integration and collaboration rather than arm's-length agreements between suppliers and customers has been recognized by researchers as well as business practitioners. Companies participating in the same supply chain identify tradeoffs with their adjacent customers and suppliers and have started to realize the importance of integration in the chain in order to focus on what is offered to the end customer in terms of cost and service. Excellence within the own company is not good enough anymore; there is also a need for external excellence in the whole supply chain. This management philosophy is called supply chain management (SCM), and has received enormous attention in research journals as well as in industry and consultancy firms. (Christopher, 2005; Lambert and Cooper, 2000)

The core message of SCM is that companies in a supply chain should create a collaborative atmosphere where mutual trust, the sharing of risks and rewards and extensive information sharing, should prevent sub-optimizations in the supply chain. It is suggested that collaboration will lead to more integrated supply chains where independent companies act together as one single entity and work towards jointly agreed goals. One of the most important functions embraced by the SCM philosophy, and perhaps the field where SCM has got the most attention, is logistics. Logisticians are by nature occupied with cross-functional and inter-organizational matters and the SCM philosophy therefore fits well together with the fundamentals of modern logistics thinking.

The role of top management as stated above the SCM expression is unclear and empirical studies indicate a difference between the ideal SCM theory and practice. Taking the SCM philosophy from theory to practice seems to be a difficult task for companies, despite the many obvious advantages. An often mentioned key enabler, and a necessary prerequisite for performing SCM in real life, is top management support (Christopher, 2005). This is also supported by a recently conducted survey study (Larson et al., 2007) among senior members of the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP) where top management support is identified as the most important facilitator for implementation of SCM. This study takes a stance on the call for top management support, with the clear assumption that top managers have a significant impact on realizing and developing a company's SCM practices. Without proper top management support, SCM will be nothing more than a promising theory (Sandberg, 2007). Considering the survey results from Larson et al. (2007), the importance of top management also becomes clear when looking at the main implementation barriers found in the study. These were functional silos, incompatible technology/systems, lack of a common SCM perspective, conflict among supply chain members, and inadequate employee skills. Indeed, these barriers can be brought down with strong top management support.

Today, companies both large and small are mainly focusing on becoming efficient and flexible in their operations in order to handle and deal with uncertainty in the business environment and the ever increasing competition in the industry. Most companies have placed responsibility on top managers to ensure these objectives are met. The managers need to strategize on how to manage the entire supply chain to realize these objectives. However, most managers have not been able to formulate the right strategies required to achieve these objectives in supply chain management. This may be due to poor enabling environment in these companies or incompetency of the management. Therefore, to address these inefficiencies and incompetencies, a call for strategic fit on a company's core competencies, strategies and capabilities is needed. The purpose of this research was to describe and explain the role of top level management in a company's supply chain performance. The study tried to find out the work of managers in coordinating supply chains, continuous development, value addition and organizational performance. The main objective of the study was to establish the role of top level managers in supply chain performance adopted by different companies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Aspects of Supply Chain Management

The term “Supply Chain Management” is very generic and can encompass a broad range of practices throughout organizations. It can be defined as in many ways depending on the strategy and operations a company uses to manage its supply chains. Simply, it is defined as “ the practice of coordinating the flow of goods, services, information and finances as they move from raw materials to parts suppliers to manufacturer to wholesaler to retailer to consumer” . A supply chain is a group of organizations and acquaintances who trade with a firm. They form the basis of a firm’s operations and activities. There are two types of flow in a supply chain namely; upstream flow and downstream flow. A supply chain involves the exchange of goods and/or information (Tan, 2001).

2.2 Factors of a good Supply Chain

For a supply chain to be managed properly and effectively, the intended distribution network is configured. The configuration of a distribution network involves the determination of the number of warehouse facilities, transport facilities, clientele distribution, distribution centers and supplier network. Secondly, distribution strategy of a supply chain must be monitored. The distribution strategy maps how an organization intends to distribute its goods and services to its clients effectively and efficiently. The distribution strategy covers how the goods will be delivered to the client, mode of transport, methods through which transportation will be monitored and the methods of replenishing supplies. The logistical operations of the firm should also be well organized and tradeoffs must be maintained. Tradeoffs reduce overall costs of a company and this helps boost performance and profitability of the firm. It is far much logical and economical to transport a full truck’s load of a commodity than a partial load as transport charges are usually the same. Management should therefore put in place appropriate systems to ensure logistical planning of a firms operation. (Knill,1997). Inventory management is another important aspect of SCM. It enables a firm to actually know what it has in stock and what it doesn’t. From the inventory records the flow patterns of goods can be established.

2.3 Functions/activities of a Supply Chain

A supply chain has three main functions namely; strategic, functional and operational. Strategic functions are long term functions that are realized in the long run. They involve strategic planning, life cycle management activities and long term resource planning. Tactical functions are mid-term functions which involve transport strategies, transportation routes, contracts, agreement sourcing and the making of milestone payments. Operational functions are those functions that are realized in the day to day running of a firm’s supply chain. They include production and transportation plans that are done a daily basis (Schenfeldt, 2008)

2.4 Supply Chain Orientation (SCO)

SCO term was introduced by Mentzer et al. (2001). In their literature review on SCM, the authors identify three streams of literature where one of them is rephrased to supply chain orientation instead of supply chain management. According to the authors, this stream of literature considers SCM as a philosophy and defines it as “the recognition by an organization of the systemic, strategic implications of the tactical activities involved in managing the various flows in a supply chain” (Mentzer et al., 2001, p. 11). A SCO is seen as a prerequisite to SCM, which in turn is interpreted to be actions undertaken to realize the SCO philosophy.

Hence, the authors state that a SCO in itself is not enough; it should rather be considered as a catalyst in order to make actions easier and more likely to occur. For example, as many SCM authors recognize, SCM implementation requires a fundamental shift from functional to process thinking. As a start for such a change, a strong SCO is required.

The customer focus suggested by Mentzer et al. (2001) means that best practice companies consider SCM activities as an important strategic weapon in order to keep old customers as well as gain new ones. It also implies that there is more than a cost focus behind the work efforts in the supply chain; SCM can increase service and the revenue of a company and lead to profitable growth for the company (D'Avanzo et al., 2003). According to Mentzer et al. (2001) top managers need to have a SCO. It is stated that "a company possesses a supply chain orientation (SCO) if its management can see the implications of managing the upstream and downstream flows of products, services, finances and information across their suppliers and their customers." Matchette and Lewinski (2005) argue that top management functions as the main driver for a friendly SCM culture in the company and the usage of proper measurement that facilitates SCM initiatives. Top management also naturally has the position to coordinate and relate the SCO to the company's business strategy and culture.

2.5 Supply Chain Coordination and Integration

In accordance with Mentzer et al.'s (2001) definition, the SCM literature in general stresses the importance of internal as well as external coordination and integration in the supply chain (Fugate et al., 2006). For example, in his description of the transaction based and customer value based models, Abrahamsson (2006) stresses the importance of integration by arguing that the difference between the two models is the focus on the interfaces between functions and/or companies in the supply chain. In the customer based value model, similar to the understanding of what SCM is, these interfaces are considered as "the missing link" in supply chain development. Abrahamsson (2006) states that "an improvement of these interfaces can give greater economies of integration" Indeed, because of the economic rationale, coordination and integration issues are in the heart of SCM practice and due to increased specialization in the supply chains with more actors involved as a consequence (e.g. logistics service providers), it has grown in importance. Concerning coordination, the nature of SCM needs a force standing above the functional silos and focusing on the "horizontal organization" (Mangan and Christopher, 2005). Top management has this position and should therefore be the main enabler for SCM initiatives. Top management can also overcome the walls between historically separated functions such as demand functions (e.g. marketing and sales) and supply (Matchette and Lewinski, 2005).

2.6 Supply chain sustainability

Supply chain is a business issue affecting an organisation's supply chain or logistics network and is frequently quantified by comparison with social, ethical and cultural ratings. Consumers have become more aware of the environmental impact of their purchases and along with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are setting the agenda for transitions to organically grown foods, anti-sweatshop labour codes and locally produced foods that support interdependent and small businesses. Many organisations are consequently engaged in exploring how they can reduce carbon footprints and thus improve their ratings (KASNEB news line, issue no 42011)

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This research employed a descriptive survey design where data was collected from members of the population in order to establish the role of top level managers in supply chain performance adopted by different companies. According to (Orodho, 2009), descriptive survey design is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behavior of a subject without influencing it in any way. The objective of descriptive research is to answer who, what, when, where, which, why and how of the subject under study.

3.2 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

(Orodho, 2009) defines Sampling as a process of selecting units from a population of interest so that by studying the sample, one may fairly generalize results and attribute it to the population from which the units were chosen. It is the process of selecting a number of objects from a population. This process is carried out in such a way that the selected members of the population have characteristics representative of the entire population. A purposeful sampling was done where every company had a chance and a computer generated random sampling was conducted where firms and managers were randomly picked. According to (Orodho, 2009), researchers select sampling unit subjectively in an attempt to obtain a sample that appears to be representative of the population. In this case, the chance that the particular unit was selected as a sample depends on the subjective judgment of the researcher. In this case a sample of 20-30% is acceptable. The sample size for this study was 20 companies out of 60 firms located in Meru Town. From each company 4 managers were availed as respondents.

3.3 Data Collection and analysis

Data was collected by use of self-administered semi - structured questionnaires which were hand delivered to the respondents and collected after they were completed. This method was adopted because it covered all the areas that the researcher intended to cover and the perception that the respondents were well versed with the subject under research, thereby requiring no guidance when responding to the questions. The data collected was inspected, filtered, transformed and modeled with the goal of highlighting useful information and suggesting conclusions. The quality of the data was also be checked using descriptive statistics techniques (mean, standard deviation, median), normality (skewness, kurtosis, frequency histograms, and normal probability plots) and associations (correlations, scatter plots).The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

4.0 Empirical Results and Discussion

4.1 Types of Companies

The type of companies is an important aspect in determining the type of inventory held by these organizations. The table below shows the number of companies included in the study.

Table 1: Type of companies

Company type	Frequency	Percentage
Manufacturing	3	15
Processing	6	30
Retail	11	55
Total	20	100

Table 1, 15% of the companies are manufacturing, 30% are processing companies while a bulk of the companies (55%) are retail companies. This is evidence that most companies are retail in nature and there is a need to manage these companies' supply chains for efficiency and optimum performance.

4.2 Position Held in Management

The study also sought to identify various levels of top management that have an influence in supply chains.

Table 2: Position of management

Position	Respondents	Percentage
CEO/ Company Director	3	8.5
Purchasing manager	6	17.1
Logistics manager	8	22.9
Production manager	8	22.9
Warehouse manager	5	14.3
Marketing manager	5	14.3
Total	35	100

Source; author (2015)

Table 2, shows that 8.5% of the respondents were CEO's, 17.1% were purchasing managers, 22.9% were production and logistics managers, warehousing and marketing managers comprised of 14.3%. This is clear evidence that at least there is some sharing of responsibilities in supply chain management and that responsibility is not solely vested in single individuals.

4.3 Top Managers' Working Experience

The study sought to find out the level of experience gained in their roles and the results are as tabulated in table 3.

Table 3: Top Managers' Working Experience

Working experience	Number of respondents	Percentage
Above 10 years	11	31.4
Between 5-9 years	16	45.7
Between 1-4 years	8	22.9
Total	35	100

Source; author (2013)

Table 3, (31.4%) of top level managers had a job experience spanning more than ten years. Those having experience between 5 to 9 years were 45.7% while those with less than five years working experience were 22.9%. The results are a clear indication of the deficiency in top level management's experience and this may therefore explain the inefficiencies seen in most companies while trying to manage the supply chains. This causes problems such as long lead times and delayed deliveries.

4.4. Suppliers of the Companies

This study also sought to find out the number of suppliers preferred by top managers.

Table 4: Number of suppliers to companies

Number of suppliers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Above 10	4	20
5-9	6	30
1-4	8	40
None (internal supply)	2	10
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

Table 4, shows that 20% of the companies have multiple suppliers (usually above 10), 30% have between five and nine suppliers and a further 40% have between one and four suppliers while only 10% have no supplier at all. These results are a clear indication that most companies have very few suppliers. This is a best practice that very few companies are yet to adopt. Having one or two suppliers aid organizations in creating and maintaining good relationships with them. This is important as companies are able to have consistent supply of materials and products. Moreover, quality is also maintained as managers are able to track production of these materials even up to the third tier supplier. Most of the processing companies studied (especially Tea Factories), claimed that they even monitor the kind of tea seedlings that farmers plant. These companies even go to the extent of providing those seedlings to farmers and other inputs. This aimed at ensuring a quality tea leaf is picked hence quality tea.

4.5 Inventory management

The study sought to find out the techniques adopted in inventory control and the results are tabulated in Table 5.

Table 5: Inventory control techniques

Technique	Frequency	Percentage
JIT	5	25
LIFO	7	35
FIFO	8	40
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

Most organizations apply First In First Out (40%) technique to manage inventory followed closely by those that utilize LIFO (35%) while only a few use JIT. Application of these inventory control technique is a great impetus to achieving optimum material flow. Companies using FIFO gave a reason of trying to avoid dead stock by ensuring that materials that come in first are used first. Companies that use LIFO do so because there warehouse layouts only allow staking thus materials at the top of a stack are issued first. Other companies use JIT as a best practice to minimize inventory held. This saves the companies on inventory holding costs.

4.6 Functions to Outsource

In supply chain management, the provision of transport, warehousing and inventory control is increasingly subcontracted to specialists or logistics partners. Therefore the study sought to find out the various activities that top management preferred to outsource. The results are tabulated in Table 6.

Table 6: Outsourced Functions

Function	Frequency	Percentage
Transporting	10	50
Warehousing	3	15
Inventory control	7	35
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

The study found out that 50% of the companies preferred outsourcing transport, 15% outsourced warehousing while 35% outsourced inventory control. These results explain the growing need to ensure development of supply chains by having some functions managed by experts from outside the company. Therefore, a blend of both local and central involvement is required to manage and control the network of suppliers and partners.

4.7 Business Growth Strategies.

Businesses have become global and competition has become stiffer. Organizations therefore strategize on how to continue being in business despite the tide of global competition. This research therefore sought to what these strategies are and the results are as tabulated below.

Table 7: Business growth strategies

Growth strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Joint ventures	7	35
Strategic alliances	4	20
Business partnership	9	45
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

Results from the table show that 35% preferred joint ventures, 20% prefer strategic alliances while 45% choose business partnerships.

4.8 Performance Measurement

By taking advantage of supplier capabilities, and emphasizing a long term supply chain perspective customer relationships can be correlated with firm performance. Therefore internal measures that companies focus on are presented in the table below.

Table 8: Areas of Performance Measurement

Areas of performance measurement	Frequency	Percentage
Cost	7	35
Customer service	4	20
Production	5	25
Assets	2	10
Quality	2	10
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

Table 8, shows that, 35% of the organizations are costs measurement oriented, 20% are focused with customer service, 25% with production and 10% for assets and quality performance measurements. This describes the need for top management to reevaluate their priority and consequently have a customer focus in the management of supply chains. This is because any organization's goal should be to ensure customer satisfaction. This will in the long run improve the general performance of the company.

4.9 Mode of Information Sharing

Information sharing through use of worldwide web is on the rise even in industry. Efficient information sharing rapidly delivers results with the agility to quickly manage future change or continuous flexibility, value and success. This research therefore sought to find out modes of information sharing adopted by companies.

Table 9: Information Sharing

Information sharing mode	frequency	Percentage
Electronic data interchange	7	35
Internet	2	10
Phone	3	15
Memo	5	25
Print media	3	15
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

From the table above, 35% of the companies use EDI to share information within and outside the company, 10% use the internet, 15% use phone and print media while 25% use memos.

4.10 Inventory managed

The research sought to establish the type of inventory kept by companies and the results are tabulated in the Table 10.

Table 10: Type Inventory kept/managed

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Raw material	6	30
Work in progress	3	15
Finished goods	11	55
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

Results shows that, 30% of the companies (mostly processing) keep raw materials, 15% keep work in progress while 55% (mostly retail companies) keep finished goods.

4.11 Types of collaboration

The research also sought to find out the kind of collaboration adopted by companies and results are as shown in the table below.

Table 11: Types of collaboration

Type of collaboration	Frequency	Percentage
Collaboration with both supplier and customer	6	30
Collaboration with supplier	9	45
Collaboration with customer	3	15
No collaboration	2	10
Total	20	100

Source; author (2015)

From the table we can conclude that 30% of the companies collaborate with suppliers and customers, 45% collaborate with suppliers only, 15% collaborate with customers on their requirements and needs while 10% do not collaborate with any party. This explains the need to collaborate with all parties in the supply chain to ensure a company acquires materials promptly at reasonable prices and at the same time pay its suppliers duly and fairly and also ensure the customer gets quality products at affordable prices.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

From the research findings based on top managers from twenty (20) companies who responded to the questionnaire, the role played by top managers can be summarized into the following archetypes as below;

Top managers play the supply chain thinker role

This means that top management's attention in this is given to traditional management issues including financial goals, investor relations and larger marketing issues. In line with these traditional top management areas, the organization with its functional division is considered as the main tool for how to implement strategies and achieve financial goals. Instead of making a strategy with the starting point in the organization or the market as such, the physical flow of products becomes an important cornerstone and driver for the strategy making. Based on the supply chain and exploitation of its members, a strategy is created that justifies and secures a desirable position in the supply chain. With this supply chain position as a basis, the companies become competitive on the market.

Top managers play the role of a frame setter

Top management implements strategies through the organization, e.g. gives mandates or responsibilities to certain departments or functions. In short, this means that top management defines the frames for the strategy with, for instance, financial goals for the business. The lower management levels in the organization thereafter further define and develop suitable sub strategies. In line with this is top management's trust in their employees, which in the case of companies is very great. The personnel are described as a major reason for the success of the companies, and entrepreneurial values and norms, with individual initiatives and responsibility, are strongly encouraged.

Top level managers play the role of a process designer

They are process oriented designers of the organization. Top management organizes their organizations so that the physical flow of goods is facilitated. The interfaces among different departments are designed so that coordination of activities and functions can be improved. Coordination of the physical flow is also enhanced by the fact that some companies do not have Logistics Managers, but only a warehouse manager or similar. No single person is thus responsible for the entire flow of goods from supplier, through the company and further on to the customers. Instead, the responsibility is shared between several people in the top management team which in turn forces them to communicate and interact around logistics issues. This therefore means that logistics naturally becomes part of top management's agenda.

Top level managers play the role of a relationship manager

Instead of always having collaborations, the analyses from the research indicate that the type of relationship to be chosen in the supply chain can better be described as a continuum ranging from collaborative to transaction based. An important task for top management therefore becomes to judge what type of supply chain relationships are suitable, and thereafter manage these relationships so that they are congruent with and support the supply chain position chosen.

Top level managers play the role of a controller

Top management team controls the business by use of well-functioning IT systems. KPIs related to functions as well as processes are continuously controlled by all members of the top management teams. The IT systems hence function as an important source for information and top management take use of this information. The IT systems in most companies are made in-house and have over time been developed and adjusted to the individual companies' requirements. In this work several top management members have had a personal involvement and the development of the IT systems is considered as a strategic matter.

Top level managers are organizers for the future

They plan for future success of their companies. Top management takes an active role when it comes to the development of new supply chain related distinctive capabilities. By structuring the company so that communication is facilitated (e.g. through top management meetings, IT systems and flat organization structure), by giving the personnel a large degree of freedom and responsibility so that continuous learning is facilitated and support investments in assets such as warehouses, top management organizes the company for future success.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on research findings, top level managers must give priority to management of supply chains and therefore the following recommendations were made:

- i. Top management should have an understanding of SCO. This an important prerequisite for proper SCM performance since it will give supply chain members an understanding for the supply chain as a whole i.e. they will have a systemic view of the supply chain.
- ii. Top managers should bring down company borders to facilitate supply chain members from the point of origin to end customer act and behave as one single organization in order to optimize the supply chain. Top managers' should ensure that their companies' systemic view should result in win-win thinking, trust and a collaborative approach towards at least adjacent suppliers or customers (but preferably if possible also towards suppliers' suppliers and customers' customers).
- iii. Logistics related issues in companies should be shared among team members instead of delegating the responsibility to one person. This will ensure a successful way to coordinate intra- and inter-organizational capabilities.
- iv. Top management should also adopt IT systems to improve physical flow of material and products.
- v. Companies should hire experts to manage the supply chains for quality and optimum performance.

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