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A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF STRATEGIC INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP, EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT, AND STAFF RETENTION IN MARITIME INSTITUTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Staff retention in technical and vocational institutions across sub-Saharan Africa remains a persistent governance crisis with acute implications for service quality and institutional viability. Nigerian maritime institutions, tasked with producing seafarers and mariners to international STCW/IMO standards, have recorded chronically low staff retention levels (M = 2.48 on a four-point scale), attributable in part to weak strategic leadership and inadequate employee management systems. This paper presents and theoretically substantiates a comprehensive conceptual model that integrates strategic institutional leadership (strategic decision-making, strategic planning, goal clarity, and ethical and social responsibility) and employee management practices (professional development, communication, and performance evaluation) as co-predictors of staff retention. The model is underpinned by three complementary theoretical frameworks: Vroom's (1964) Expectancy–Valence–Instrumentality (VIE) theory, Drucker's (1956) Management by Objectives (MBO), and Kim and Mauborgne's (2005, 2023) Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS). Drawing on empirical data from 352 staff of two Nigerian maritime universities, the paper shows that professional development (r = 0.70) and goal clarity (X^2 = 1459.638) are the strongest predictors, while overall retention remains low. The paper contributes an original theoretical synthesis, a multi-level policy framework, and a Blue Ocean ERRC Grid specifically calibrated for maritime institutional reform in developing economies. Suggestions are directed at policymakers, institutional administrators, and future researchers.

Keywords: Strategic institutional leadership; Employee management; Staff retention; Maritime education; Nigeria; Blue ocean strategy and Conceptual model

Introduction

Maritime institutions occupy a unique position in the educational landscape of developing nations. In Nigeria, these institutions, particularly the Nigerian University of Maritime Studies (Oron, Akwa-Ibom State) and the Nigerian Maritime University (Okerenkoko, Delta State), are mandated by national and international frameworks, including the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention, to produce world-class seafarers and mariners. Yet despite forty-eight years of institutional existence, Nigerian maritime institutions continue to suffer from acute staff shortages, high attrition rates, and a demonstrably low level of staff retention (Caesar, Cahoon, & Fei, 2015). The global maritime industry is facing a workforce crisis. The Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO/ISF, 2010) projected a worldwide shortage of 147,500 ship officers, a deficit that is compounded in developing nations where institutional leadership and management capacity remain underdeveloped. In Nigeria, when the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) identified a need for 50,000 seafarers to fully operationalise the cabotage regime, domestic maritime institutions could produce fewer than 3,000 (NIMASA, 2025). This gap involves both enrolment and staff stability; institutions can only train what they can retain, which is affected by factors such as inadequate funding, a lack of qualified instructors, and limited training facilities.

Globally, research consistently identifies leadership quality and management practice as primary drivers of employee retention (Xuecheng, Iqbal, & Saina, 2022; Shahzad et al., 2024). In educational contexts, studies have shown that transformational and strategic leadership styles, when combined with transparent employee management systems, significantly reduce voluntary turnover (Salau et al., 2021; CUPA-HR, 2023). However,

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empirical studies specific to maritime education institutions in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, remain sparse. In this context, researchers have not systematically modelled the theoretical literature linking strategic institutional leadership, employee management, and staff retention. This study addresses that gap. It presents, theoretically substantiates, and empirically validates a conceptual model of strategic institutional leadership, employee management, and staff retention in Nigerian maritime institutions. The model integrates three complementary theoretical lenses, Vroom's (1964) Expectancy-Valence-Instrumentality (VIE) theory; Drucker's (1956) Management by Objectives (MBO); and Kim and Mauborgne's (2005, 2023) Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) and draws on primary data collected from 352 staff members of the two aforementioned institutions. It concludes with a multi-level policy framework and a Blue Ocean ERRC grid designed to guide institutional reform.

Literature Review

Vroom's Expectancy-Valence-Instrumentality (VIE) Theory

Vroom's VIE theory, developed by Victor Harold Vroom in 1964, remains one of the most enduring processes of motivation in organisational psychology. It posits that an individual's motivational force is a multiplicative function of three cognitive perceptions: Expectancy (the belief that effort will yield performance), instrumentality (the belief that performance will lead to outcomes), and valence (the perceived value of those outcomes). Crucially, if any one of the three components is zero, motivation collapses, a mathematical relationship with profound implications for institutional design. In the context of maritime institutions, VIE theory explains why staff remain or leave. Staff who perceive that their efforts in teaching and training cadets will not be rewarded with promotion, recognition, or professional development or, worse, whose valence is suppressed by poor working conditions, absent welfare infrastructure, and opaque decision-making, will systematically disengage and exit. Fang (2023) confirms that Vroom's expectancy framework accurately predicts retention when effort-reward linkages are clearly articulated by institutional leadership. Applied to Nigerian maritime institutions, the VIE framework compels leadership to ensure that strategic decision-making, goal clarity, performance evaluation, and professional development are all structured as visible, credible reward pathways.

Management by Objectives (MBO)

Peter Drucker's (1956) Management by Objectives is a results-oriented management philosophy that emphasises participatory goal-setting, systematic performance appraisal, and continuous feedback as instruments of institutional effectiveness. MBO operates on the premise that when employees co-create their objectives in alignment with institutional goals, their psychological ownership of performance outcomes deepens, reducing disengagement and turnover (Damayanti et al., 2022). In maritime institutions, MBO principles are particularly salient because of the dual accountability structure within which they operate: they must meet internal academic and administrative standards while also complying with international maritime certification benchmarks set by the IMO and STCW. MBO provides the architecture by which institutional leadership can cascade these external compliance requirements into clear, achievable, time-bound staff objectives. The empirical finding from this study, that goal clarity exerts a highly significant influence on staff retention ($X^2 = 1459.638$, $p < 0.05$), provides direct empirical support for the predictive validity of MBO principles in this context.

The Nexus: Leadership, Management, and Retention

A growing body of international literature confirms the interdependence of strategic leadership quality, employee management practice, and staff retention outcomes. Xuecheng et al. (2022), drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), found that a transformational leadership style significantly moderated the relationship between training and development and employee retention (Frontiers in Psychology). Shahzad et al. (2024) demonstrated that strategic HR practices influence talent retention through job satisfaction and work engagement, with psychological empowerment serving as a key moderating variable. The International Journal of Organizational Analysis (Gelencsér et al., 2024) further confirmed that organisations with developed HR retention strategies and defined career pathways, characteristics aligned with MBO principles, achieve measurably higher retention rates across organisational size categories. In sub-Saharan African higher education, Salau et al. (2021) documented the direct relationship between strategic retention practices and sustainable staff performance in Nigerian universities, identifying professional development and recognition as critical institutional levers. The CUPA-HR (2023) Retention Survey in higher education further showed that 'feeling valued' and

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'belonging' were stronger predictors of retention than pay, a finding that resonates with the emphasis on ethical responsibility, communication, and team cohesion in the present model.

Table 1: Summary of Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to the Study

Theory	Theorist(s)	Core Proposition	Application to Study
Expectancy–Valence–Instrumentality (VIE)	Vroom (1964)	Motivation is a product of expected effort–performance–reward linkages.	Explains why staff stay when leadership aligns effort with valued outcomes
Management by Objectives (MBO)	Drucker (1956)	Participatory goal-setting improves commitment, performance, and accountability.	Links goal clarity and performance evaluation to retention outcomes
Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS)	Kim & Mauborgne (2005, 2023)	Value innovation through the ERRC grid creates uncontested institutional space.	Provides strategic tools for institutional leaders to redesign retention environments

Conceptual Model: Architecture and Rationale

The conceptual model presented in this paper (Figure 1) depicts a dynamic, multi-directional relationship among three domains: Strategic Institutional Leadership (SIL), Employee Management Practices (EMP), and Staff Retention (SR). It is not a simple linear model; rather, it is an integrated systems model that acknowledges moderating and mediating pathways, feedback loops, and the institutional environment as a conditioning context. The model is original in the maritime education literature and extends previous retention frameworks by incorporating both the governance dimensions of institutional leadership and the operational dimensions of employee management within a single analytical architecture.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model. See Visual Representation Below

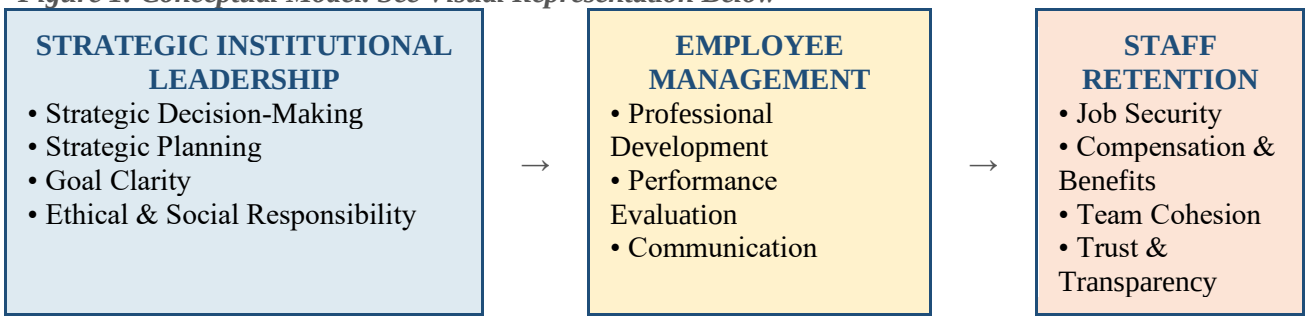


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Strategic Institutional Leadership, Employee Management, and Staff Retention in Nigerian

Domain 1: Strategic Institutional Leadership

Strategic Institutional Leadership (SIL) constitutes the first domain of the model, encompassing four construct dimensions derived from existing literature and operationalised in this study's measurement instruments. Top and middle management make strategic decisions regarding staffing, resource allocation, curriculum, and institutional direction, which reflects their quality, transparency, and inclusivity. In this study, strategic decision-making exerted a significant influence on staff retention ($X^2 = 847.212$, $p < 0.05$). Gallup (2024) confirms that managers who make transparent, staff-centred decisions create the psychological safety conditions necessary for long-term commitment, which in turn enhances staff retention and reduces turnover rates. Strategic planning involves the deliberate articulation of institutional goals, timelines, and resource mobilisation strategies. A moderate but significant correlation was found between strategic planning and staff retention ($r = 0.391$, $p < 0.05$). The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2024) demonstrated that institutions with robust strategic workforce plans exhibit higher staff retention rates, a finding replicated in the Nigerian higher education context by Salau et al. (2021). Goal clarity, which is the clear, participatory communication of expectations, job descriptions, and

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performance targets, produced the highest chi-square value in the study ($X^2 = 1459.638$). This finding corroborates MBO theory directly: when institutional leadership establishes mutually agreed, time-bound goals, employees are more motivated, more engaged, and more likely to remain (Drucker, 1956; Hogo Next, 2025). 'Ethical and social responsibility' refers to leadership behaviours that demonstrate fairness, transparency, community accountability, and ethical governance. With $X^2 = 1406.709$, ethical and social responsibility significantly influenced staff retention. Bocean et al. (2022) confirm that institutional ethical behaviour directly contributes to employee well-being and reduces turnover.

Domain 2: Employee Management Practices

Employee management practices constitute the operational translation of leadership vision into staff experience. The model identifies three empirically validated components. Professional development encompassing training, research opportunities, conference attendance, and career advancement pathways produced the strongest single statistical relationship in the study ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$). This is theoretically coherent with the VIE theory: professional development amplifies all three VIE components simultaneously by increasing expectancy (competence), instrumentality (career linkages), and valence (professional self-actualisation). Davidson (2024) in the Harvard Business Review confirmed that institutions offering robust development opportunities retain staff at significantly higher rates. In maritime education, professional development has the added significance of compliance: staff who are current with STCW/IMO certifications are not only more confident but more legally qualified to teach. Communication, which included the regularity, clarity, and bidirectionality of information flow between leadership and staff, produced a mean of 2.81, the highest mean score among all predictor variables in this study, and a significant chi-square ($X^2 = 1228.371$, $p < 0.05$). SHRM (2024) and Gallup (2024) consistently identify leadership communication as a primary factor influencing global staff engagement and retention.

Domain 3: Staff Retention Outcomes

Staff retention in the model is not conceptualised as a passive organisational outcome but as an active, multi-dimensional construct encompassing job security and stability, compensation and benefits, team cohesion, and trust and transparency. The overall staff retention level in this study was found to be low ($M = 2.48$), consistent with Caesar et al. (2015) and the BIMCO/ISF (2010) projections of global maritime workforce deficits. Staff confidence in job security and stability reflects their belief in the protection of their employment, the value of their roles, and the assurance of institutional continuity. In Nigerian maritime institutions, chronic underfunding, political interference, and unclear personnel policies undermine this dimension severely, leading to decreased morale and increased turnover rates among staff. Compensation and benefits, while not the primary retention driver in the present study's theoretical framing (as CUPA-HR (2023) confirmed, 'feeling valued' outweighs pay as a retention predictor), remain a necessary condition: uncompetitive salaries relative to the private maritime sector create persistent push factors for experienced staff.

Empirical Evidence Validating the Model

Study Design and Sample

The empirical data underpinning this model was collected from a study of strategic institutional leadership and employee management as predictors of staff retention in Nigerian maritime institutions. A descriptive survey design was employed. The accessible population comprised 2,925 staff members across both institutions and NIMASA. A proportionate cluster sampling technique yielded a sample of 352 respondents ($n = 352$). Three validated instruments were deployed: the Strategic Institutional Leadership Questionnaire (SILQ), the Employee Management Questionnaire (EMQ), and the Staff Retention Questionnaire (SRQ), all structured on a modified four-point Likert scale. Eight research questions were answered and seven hypotheses tested at $\alpha = 0.05$ using chi-square analysis and Pearson product-moment correlation. The statistical decision rule was the following: 1.00–1.99 = Very Low; 2.00–2.99 = Low; 3.00–3.49 = High; 3.50–4.00 = Very High. All seven null hypotheses were rejected, confirming significant relationships between each predictor domain and staff retention.

Results

Table 2: Summary of Empirical Findings — Predictor Variables and Staff Retention

Predictor Variable	Test Used		Statistic	p-value	Decision
Strategic	Chi-	$X^2 =$		< 0.05	H_0 Rejected –

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Predictor Variable	Test Used	Statistic	p-value	Decision
Decision-Making	Square	847.212		Significant influence
Strategic Planning	Pearson r	r = 0.391	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Moderate significant relationship
Goal Clarity	Chi-Square	X^2 = 1459.638	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Significant influence
Ethical & Social Responsibility	Chi-Square	X^2 = 1406.709	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Significant influence
Professional Development	Pearson r	r = 0.70	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Strong significant relationship
Communication	Chi-Square	X^2 = 1228.371	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Significant influence
Performance Evaluation	Chi-Square	X^2 = 1228.371	< 0.05	H₀ Rejected – Significant influence
Overall Staff Retention Level	Mean Score	M = 2.48	—	Low retention level

The findings reveal a consistent pattern: all components of strategic institutional leadership and all dimensions of employee management practice exert statistically significant influences on staff retention. The strongest effect was observed for professional development (r = 0.70), followed by goal clarity (X^2 = 1459.638) and ethical and social responsibility (X^2 = 1406.709). The moderate correlation for strategic planning (r = 0.391) is noteworthy and suggests that, while they exist, their operationalisation and communication with staff remain inconsistent.

Blue Ocean ERRC Grid for Maritime Institutional Reform

A key theoretical contribution of this paper is the application of the Blue Ocean Strategy ERRC grid specifically calibrated to the retention crisis in Nigerian maritime institutions. The ERRC grid asks institutional leaders to systematically interrogate four questions: What should be eliminated? What should be reduced? What should be raised beyond industry standards? What should be created that does not yet exist? Table 3 presents a completed ERRC grid derived from the empirical findings of this study and the theoretical priorities of BOS.

Table 3: Blue Ocean ERRC Grid for Staff Retention Reform in Nigerian Maritime Institutions

ELIMINATE	REDUCE	RAISE	CREATE
Hierarchical, non-participatory decision-making	Bureaucratic bottlenecks in staff promotions	Transparency in performance evaluation	Maritime-specific career pathways tied to STCW/IMO standards
Opaque communication practices	Dependency on foreign maritime training for cadets	Goal clarity for all staff categories	Staff welfare innovations: insurance, hospitals, pension schemes
Punitive performance appraisal culture	Overreliance on transactional leadership	Professional development investment and sponsorship	Blended e-learning platforms integrating MET global standards

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The ERRC grid reveals that institutional reform does not require unlimited resources. Rather, it requires the strategic reallocation of existing resources toward high-leverage interventions. Eliminating opaque communication and punitive appraisal costs the institution nothing financially; raising goal clarity and professional development investment requires moderate budgetary commitment; creating maritime-specific career pathways tied to STCW/IMO certification and innovative welfare infrastructure (hospital facilities, pension schemes, and blended learning platforms) requires policy commitment and interagency collaboration with NIMASA and the Federal Ministry of Transport.

Discussion of the Findings

Centrality of Professional Development

The strength of the professional development–retention relationship (r = 0.70) is the study's most striking empirical finding. It is consistent with a broad international evidence base (Davidson, 2024; Charles et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2024) and carries a particular urgency in maritime education. Unlike in conventional universities, where staff professional development is largely self-directed, maritime instructors require periodic renewal of STCW-mandated certifications to retain their legal authority to teach. This study documents that when institutions neglect to fund or facilitate this renewal, staff are left with a difficult decision: either self-fund their certifications or leave. The high correlation is thus not merely a motivational phenomenon; it is a regulatory compliance imperative.

Goal Clarity as the MBO Mechanism

The second major finding revealed the dominant chi-square value for goal clarity ($X^2 = 1459.638$), which speaks directly to the operationalisation of MBO in institutional contexts. Drucker's (1956) insight that performance is fundamentally a function of clarity was written in the context of corporate management, but it applies with equal force to paramilitary vocational institutions. The survey data reveal that staff frequently misunderstand institutional strategic goals, seldom receive updated departmental objectives, and feel frustrated by a lack of directional clarity. This is not a leadership competence deficit alone; it is a systemic communication failure that the model addresses through the employee management domain, specifically through the communication construct.

Ethical Leadership as a Structural Retention Driver

The significance of ethical and social responsibility ($X^2 = 1406.709$) challenges conventional retention models that focus predominantly on pay, benefits, and career advancement. In maritime institutions, where working conditions at sea involve genuine personal risk and where the institutional promise to protect staff welfare through adequate facilities is routinely unfulfilled, ethical leadership functions as a relational contract. Bocean et al. (2022) and Wang Chan (2024) both confirm that perceived ethical leadership increases trust, reduces voluntary turnover, and enhances institutional loyalty.

Policy and Practice Implications

Table 4: Multi-Level Policy Framework for Improving Staff Retention in Nigerian Maritime Institutions

Stakeholder	Recommended Action	Theoretical Basis
Federal Government / NIMASA	Fund dedicated ships and training facilities; enforce IMO/STCW compliance reviews	Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS)
Institutional Leadership	Implement participatory goal-setting and transparent performance review systems.	MBO (Drucker, 1956)
HR / Employee Management Teams	Design professional development roadmaps linked to career advancement and reward.	VIE Theory (Vroom, 1964)
Academic Researchers	Replicate study using SEM; extend to state polytechnics and colleges of maritime studies.	Conceptual Model (this study)

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The policy framework presented in Table 4 operationalises the conceptual model across four stakeholder tiers. At the federal government level, the most urgent priority is the provision of institutional ships and practical training infrastructure, the absence of which is a documented cause of staff demoralisation and a structural impediment to STCW/IMO compliance. At the institutional leadership level, the findings mandate the systematic adoption of participatory goal-setting and transparent performance review, consistent with MBO principles. At the employee management level, the correlation of r = 0.70 for professional development represents an evidence-based imperative for the design of structured career development roadmaps linked to promotion, certification renewal, and financial rewards. At the research level, the model's empirical validation with chi-square and Pearson correlation methods calls for replication using structural equation modelling (SEM) to formally test mediation and moderation pathways.

Conclusion

This paper has presented, substantiated, and empirically validated a comprehensive conceptual model linking strategic institutional leadership, employee management practices, and staff retention in Nigerian maritime institutions. Grounded in Vroom's (1964) VIE theory, Drucker's (1956) MBO framework, and Kim and Mauborgne's (2005, 2023) Blue Ocean Strategy, the model provides a multi-theoretical architecture for understanding why staff retention in these institutions remains critically low and what leadership and management interventions are most likely to reverse this trend. The empirical data confirm that professional development (r = 0.70), goal clarity (X^2 = 1459.638), ethical and social responsibility (X^2 = 1406.709), and communication (X^2 = 1228.371) are the most powerful predictors of retention, while the overall retention level remains low (M = 2.48). The Blue Ocean ERRC Grid offers institutional leaders a practical, resource-conscious roadmap for reform. The multi-level policy framework translates the model's findings into actionable priorities for government, institutional leadership, and HR management teams. Nigeria is a maritime nation based on geography and economic destiny. The inability of its maritime institutions to retain the human capital they produce undermines not only institutional effectiveness but national competitiveness in a globally integrated maritime economy, leading to a workforce that is ill-equipped to meet the demands of the industry and diminishing Nigeria's potential as a key player in maritime trade. Strategic leadership and evidence-based employee management are not optional governance accessories; they are structural prerequisites for institutional survival. This model provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for that transformation.

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