



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Application of the ‘Chameleon Survival Strategy Model’ in the Study of Strategic Management in Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises

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**Abstract:**

*With the objective finding out the challenges faced by Small and Medium-scale Enterprises (SMEs) in their efforts to adopt strategic management, the research leading to the production of this paper was conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe. Making use of the Chameleon Survival Strategy Model the author studied the characteristics of SMEs under each attribute of the model and extracted the major possible causes of failure to embrace strategic management in SMEs. The application of the model and the findings obtained from the respondents against its attributes are presented in this paper. Out of the findings key challenges to SMEs are explained, leading to the conclusion that SMEs in the research generally failed the strategic management test presented in the model. The conclusion is that SMEs in Harare did not practise strategic management effectively due to the challenges outlined by the author.*

**Keywords:** *strategic management, Small and Medium scale enterprises, the chameleon, Survival, Strategy*

### 1. Introduction

This paper presents the finding of a doctoral research on strategic management challenges to small and medium scale enterprises carried out in Harare, Zimbabwe. For the purposes of this research, small and medium scale businesses employing only up to 30 employees, were considered. From the demographic data obtained 70.71% of the businesses employed 2 to 5 employees while 20.54% employed 6 to 10 people. 7.07% employed 11 to 15 people and 1.01% of the SMEs employed 16 to 20 employees while 0.34% employed 16 to 20 people. The remaining 0.34% employed 26 to 30 employees. In light of the diverse characteristics of small and medium scale businesses in Zimbabwe, the researcher sought to limit the scope of the research to businesses employing 2 to 30 people to avoid distortions arising from the nature of some well-established businesses that operate as SMEs. The sample of businesses used, which had a total of 297 respondents was drawn from this group of small and medium-scale enterprises. The data obtained from the research were analysed against the seven attributes of the Chameleon Survival Strategy Model, which the author developed as an approach to the study of strategic management in small and medium-scale enterprises.

### 2. Chameleon Survival Strategy Model

The Chameleon Survival Strategy Model was postulated by the author as part of his doctoral research, with the objective of devising a model to be used to study the extent to which small and medium scale enterprises practise strategic management. It is the author's view that using the model as a benchmark SMEs can be analysed through the study of a range of variables, classified under each attribute of the chameleon as presented in the model in Fig 1. Following the logic of the systems theory, the model likens the SME to the chameleon as it thrives in the natural environment around it. Just as the chameleon lives in a highly dynamic and competitive environment so does the SME in any given economy. The goal of the chameleon is to survive, prosper and be productive in its environment and it has done so well over the years by adapting and positively responding to developments around it. SMEs the world over seek to survive, make profits and remain competitive and viable in their business environments. The analogy between the chameleon and the SME therefore led to the development of the Chameleon Survival Strategy Model, which was inspired by the systems theory (Ashby, 1956).

Although the chameleon's characteristics can easily be associated with negativity when likened to the behaviour of humans, the author took a positive approach to the study of the chameleon as a biological system. One way of interpreting a business that acts like a chameleon could be that it is bound to be unreliable, with the tendency to shift goal posts and to deceive those it deals with. In proposing the model the author looked at the chameleon as a biological system that has sought to guarantee its survival and success over the years, through the adoption of a wide range of adaptations to its environment. For sustainable survival, the SME should be a

system that is open to and interacts with its environment, evolving positively and negatively in response to developments in its environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1969). In light of this fact, the model exhibited in Fig. 1 and the explanations in Table 1 show the analogy between the chameleon and the SME.

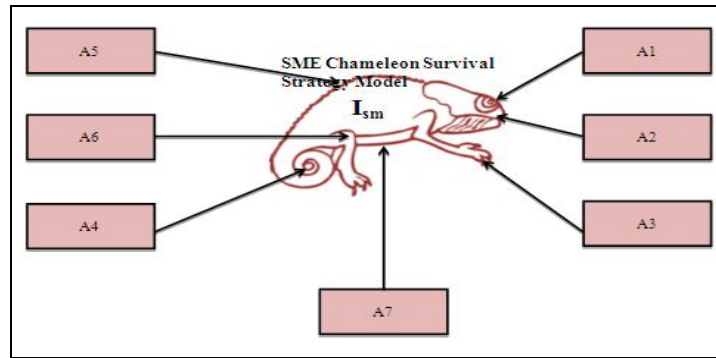


Figure 1

Key

- A1: Constant multi-pronged assessment and monitoring of the environment. Eyes that can revolve around independently of each other.
- A2: Use of unique attributes and competences to gain competitive advantage. Projectile, ballistic and sticky tongue to catch prey.
- A3: Consolidation of position in the market. Specially designed feet with a human like grasp.
- A4: Standardisation and stability of operations. Long prehensile tail for stability.
- A5: Adaptation to changes and developments in the environment. Bumpy skin with special cells that change colour.
- A6: Effective strategy formulation, planning, design, appraisal, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Careful and well calculated movements.
- A7: Effective strategic positioning in the market. Strategic positioning abilities.

2.1. Interpretation of the Model

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Eyes that can revolve around independently of each other	<b>Constant multi-pronged monitoring of the environment:</b> This enables the enterprise to adjust to the requirements of the operating environment but focusing on its needs. Environmental monitoring should not only focus on one aspect at a time but multi-pronged to ensure effectiveness of response mechanisms and adjustments.
Projectile, ballistic and sticky tongue to catch prey	<b>Use of unique attributes and competences to gain competitive advantage:</b> The SME needs to be able to use the tools and skills at its disposal to gain and enhance competitive advantage in its environment. Focus should be on maximising the use of those competences and abilities the business has, which competitors lack and take full advantage.
Specially designed feet with a human like grasp.	<b>Consolidation of position in the market:</b> For the purposes of survival and building a viable customer base, the SME needs to consolidate its position effectively each time it makes a move. It needs to establish a firm and unshakeable grip in its area of specialisation to deal with challenges of vulnerability and loss of focus.
Long prehensile tail for stability: The tail of the chameleon acts as the fifth limb, which helps enhance stability as it manoeuvres among the branches of trees in search for its prey (Le Berre and Bartlett, 2009).	<b>Standardisation and stability of operations:</b> Every successful business needs to be stable and capable of offering standardised products and services. Such attributes help the business establish its identity in the market.
Bumpy skin with special cells that change colour.	<b>Adaptation to changes and developments in the environment:</b> The business needs to be able to positively respond to changes and developments in its operating

	environment. Its adaptation should focus on survival, maintenance of strategic vision and profitability among other factors.
Careful and well calculated movements	<b>Effective strategy formulation and implementation:</b> The business should effectively formulate and implement strategies that are relevant to the needs of the organisation and the dynamics of its operating environment. Strategies need to be carefully calculated to ensure future success.
Strategic positioning abilities.	<b>Strategic positioning for survival:</b> The SME needs to be strategically positioned all the time, for it to circumvent and overcome adversities in its operating environment. Following the idea that the system cannot operate effectively without its environment, strategic positioning becomes very important to the business.

Table 1: The Chameleon Survival Strategies

**3. Review of findings in light of the chameleon survival strategy model**

The findings of the research against the attributes of the model are hereby presented.

*3.1. Constant multi-pronged monitoring of the environment*

Figure 2 below presents the first attribute of the chameleon against which SMEs were studied with the objective of checking their compliance with the model.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Eyes that can revolve around independently of each other monitoring and studying the environment.	<b>Constant multi-pronged monitoring of the environment:</b> This enables the enterprise to adjust to the requirements of the operating environment but focusing on its needs. Environmental monitoring should not only focus on one aspect at a time but should be multi-pronged to ensure effectiveness of response mechanisms and adjustments.

Figure 2

The response pattern to variables that were classified under the first attribute of the chameleon are presented in figure 3 below.

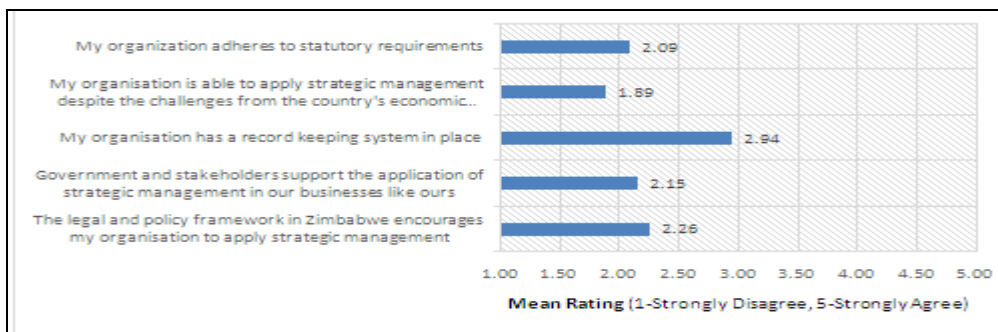


Figure 3

Responses to the set of questions in this cluster showed that SMEs needed to develop the ability to monitor and evaluate the environment around them to enable them to adjust according to prevailing conditions. This could only be achieved effectively if the organisation had a record keeping system, which stores internal and external information, which is then used during strategic planning. Responses to the question regarding the legal and policy framework showed that entrepreneurs felt that it did not encourage the application of strategic management. This however needed careful consideration in light of outcomes from the interviews held with stakeholders and indicators from the review of their documents, carried out by the researcher. The general conclusion put forward by the researcher from information obtained from key informants directly and indirectly supporting SMEs was that the legal and policy framework in Zimbabwe encouraged the application of strategic management. The main problem was that the majority of SMEs operated informally and never attempted to educate themselves on statutory requirements and the regulations put in place by Government and stakeholders. For a number of Entrepreneurs interviewed the only time they tried to adhere to statutory requirements and other legal and policy matters was when applying for a loan or submitting tender documents to Government and parastatals. Apart from that, SMEs generally operated as far away as possible from legal and policy guidelines. It was also important to note that stakeholders supporting SMEs as well as government agencies could have also been to blame for the ignorance and low adherence to legal and policy frameworks among SMEs. The question to ask is whether SMEs participated in any way in the formulation and review of these policies and guidelines. Were the stakeholders doing enough lobbying and advocacy work to sensitize SMEs on these issues? Further research would help answer these questions effectively.

3.2. Use of unique attributes and competences to gain competitive advantage

Through the use of unique attributes and competences, SMEs just as the chameleon does could easily gain competitive advantage over other players in their environment as the extract from the model in figure 4 presents.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Projectile, ballistic and sticky tongue to catch prey	<p><b>Use of unique attributes and competences to gain competitive advantage:</b>                      The SME needs to be able to use the tools and skills at its disposal to gain and enhance competitive advantage in its environment. Focus should be on maximising the use of those unique competences and abilities the business has, which competitors lack and take full advantage.</p>

Figure 4

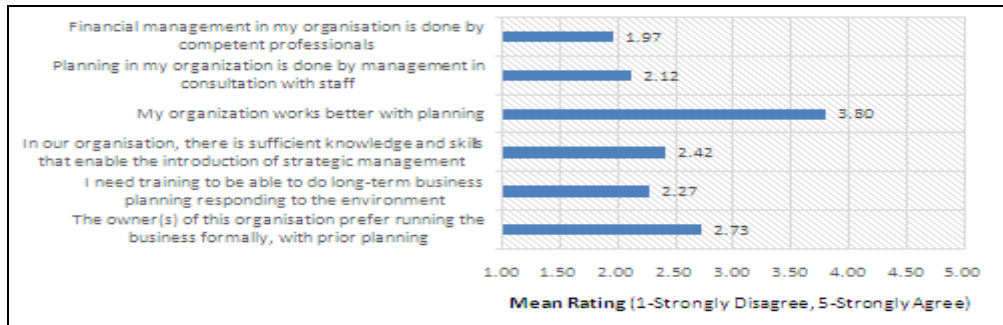


Figure 5

Through the effective use of unique resources and competences at one’s disposal, which others do not have, a business can enhance its competitive advantage as does the chameleon. The variables listed here sought to establish the extent to which SMEs took advantage of and made use of this valuable art, for the purposes of value addition and strategic positioning. This would definitely not be possible if all planning was done by management without involving staff and if one believed that their business worked better informally rather than formally as evidenced by the response pattern presented in figure 5 above. It is encouraging to note that the majority of respondents disagree with the statement that their organisations work better without planning. Even in the interviews, respondents were very keen to learn how to plan and how to manage their businesses in a structured manner. There were however some who thought planning was not necessary given that they had run for years without it and had not encountered any challenges. The response pattern pointed to the need for stakeholders to support SMEs through training and capacity building to ensure that they made full use of the resources and competences they possessed. In some cases during the interviews respondents showed a lack of the ability to identify talent among their staff and to use it to the business’ advantage. A number would complain of workers having stolen their ideas and formed competing businesses close to them while some complained of pilferage and lack of commitment among staff. Capacity building on approaches to the identification, nurturing and development of talent among entrepreneurs, would help them significantly. The chameleon knows the unique competences and skills it has and it takes full advantage of them to ensure its survival and strategic positioning in its environment. SMEs also need this ability if they are to survive in their environments.

3.3. Consolidation of position in the market

For a business to survive in a competitive environment it needs to be able to consolidate its position in its area of operation. It needs to have a firm grip on its clientele who are its means of survival. The SME could learn from the chameleon’s well adapted feet which ensure that it always has a firm grip on the branches as it navigates its way across trees. As presented in figure 6, SMEs can establish a firm and unshakeable grip in their areas of specialisation if they learn to adapt in accordance with the factors of their operating environment.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Specially designed feet with a human-like grasp.	<p><b>Consolidation of position in the market:</b>                      For the purposes of survival and building a viable customer base, the SME needs to consolidate its position effectively each time it makes a move. It needs to establish a firm and unshakeable grip in its area of specialisation to deal with challenges of vulnerability and loss of focus.</p>

Figure 6

Figure 7 presents variables that reveal the extent to which SMEs are were able to mimic the chameleon.

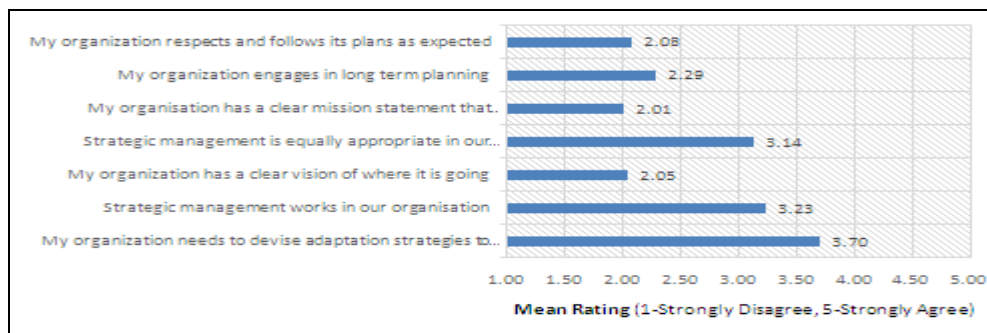


Figure 7

Through the adoption of strategic management, SMEs can be able to stamp some kind of authority in their environment in their small ways, consolidating their position in the market. This can only be possible if entrepreneurs believe that strategic management is not only for large corporates but very necessary in SMEs. Responses to questions in this category were quite positive, though there were cases where respondents argued against the effectiveness of strategic management in small businesses. Most of such views revolved around the lack of complexity of SMEs and their ability to shift from one trade to another to maximise profits. Long-term planning is shunned by some whose priority is to make quick and easy cash without any regard for quality and sustainable customer service. Like the chameleon, SMEs need to apply strategic management so as to establish a firm grip in their trade and to be able to perfect their acts and thus win a sustainable component of market share. Without strategic positioning, this would not be possible.

3.4. Standardisation and stability of operations

Figure 8 below presents another aspect of the model that SMEs need to consider.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
<p>Long prehensile tail for stability: The tail of the chameleon acts as the fifth limb, which helps enhance stability as it manoeuvres among the branches of trees in search for its prey (Le Berre and Bartlett, 2009).</p>	<p><b>Standardisation and stability of operations:</b> Every successful business needs to be stable and capable of offering standardised products and services. Such attributes help the business establish its identity in the market.</p>

Figure 8

Figure 9 below presents the response rates to the set of questions which sought to find out whether SMEs had standardised and stable operations.

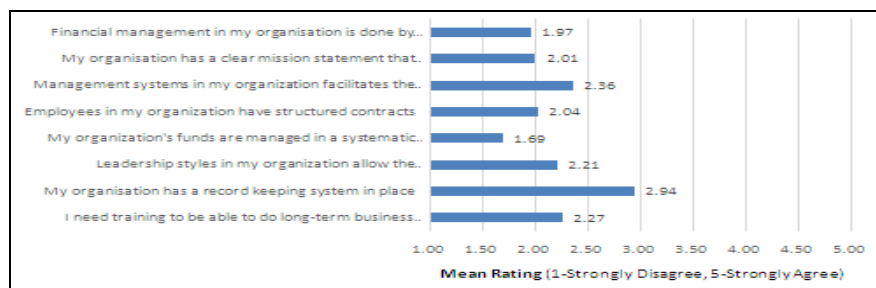


Figure 9

The cluster of questions presented in figure 9 above sought to establish the extent to which SMEs had standardised operations that were stable enough to make strategic management feasible. The different organs of the chameleon work in harmony so that one could safely say that it has well standardised operations which ensure overall stability, as it carries on its activities. The response patterns in this cluster of questions shows serious lack of standardised operations in SMEs as well as lack of stability. This in essence buttresses the conclusion that the majority of SMEs do not engage in strategic management. The interviews also confirmed this, especially the feedback from the financial institutions and parastatals. Because of lack of stability SMEs were viewed as unreliable and untrustworthy. A number of financial institutions had long lists of unserviced loans extended to SMEs due to the lack of standardised operational activities. In more than twenty cases, entrepreneurs borrowed money using well-structured business plans but then used the money for purposes that had little or nothing to do with the business. The concept of the human factor (Mararike, 1998, Nyasani, 1997 and MacNabb, 1995) comes to mind here, where one’s background affects decision making and the way they run their business.

3.5. Adaptation to changes and developments in the environment

The systems theory, which inspired the Chameleon Survival Strategy Model advocates for the study of the organisation as a system operating within a bigger system which is made up of other subsystems (Ashby, 1956 and Von Bertalanffy, 1969). This view of the organisation calls for the need for the organisation to adapt to its environment for it to survive. The chameleon has, overtime adapted to its environment and has special attributes that help it survive in an otherwise threatening environment as presented in figure 10.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Bumpy skin with special cells that change colour.	<b>Adaptation to changes and developments in the environment:</b> The business needs to be able to positively respond to changes and developments in its operating environment. Its adaptation should focus on survival, maintenance of strategic vision and profitability among other factors.

Figure 10

The overall response rates to the set of questions which sought to establish whether SMEs studied had been able to adapt to their environment, are presented in fig 11.

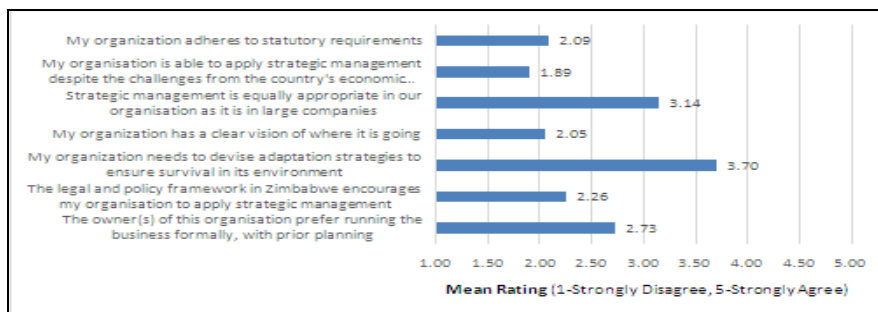


Figure 11

For any business to survive there is need for it to respond positively to developments in its operating environment. Any form of naivety or disregard of the requirements of the environment, can lead to all sorts of problems to the organisation. Response rates to this cluster of questions showed that SMEs did not effectively respond to developments in their environments. Failure to adhere to statutory requirements, failure to read the economic environment for the purposes of strategic planning and the lack of futuristic planning, all combine to paint a very negative picture of the way SMEs operated. What it literally meant was that if Government were to stamp its foot and enforce statutory requirements more effectively, a massive percentage of SMEs would be closed down. SMEs therefore needed to learn from the chameleon which has adapted so well to its environment over the years ensuring its survival and development.

3.6. Effective strategy formulation and implementation

The chameleon is known for making well calculated movements, following its strategic vision and its basic needs. It would not move just for the sake of doing so, each time it moves it has a goal in mind. SMEs need to maintain focus and only move when necessary and with a goal in mind.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Careful and well calculated movements	<b>Effective strategy formulation and implementation:</b> The business should effectively formulate and implement strategies that are relevant to the needs of the organisation and the dynamics of its operating environment. Strategies need to be carefully calculated to ensure future success.

Figure 12

Figure 13 below presents the response rates to the set of statements used to evaluate the extent to which SMEs are consistent with the model.



Figure 13

Response rates to this cluster of questions again showed that SMEs were not consistent with the model. Failure to establish internal systems that were consistent with strategic direction and the needs of the business made SMEs vulnerable and incapable of meeting the challenges of the environment around them. The question that needed to be asked at this level was: What hinderances and obstacles did SMEs face in their efforts to incorporate staregic planning in their value chains? Responses to questions here gave an insight into the challenges they faced,which ranged from perceptual challenges, lack of knowledge, the business practices they tended to engage in and their attitudes towards strategic management as an approach to business management. The greatest challenge that faced the SMEs from these findings was the ability to emulate the chameleon’s survival strategies, some of which are evolutional and tactical.

3.7. Strategic positioning for survival

The chameleon’s ability to position itself strategically has allowed it to survive in an environment that has other bigger and dangerous stakeholders. Figure 14 presents this attribute and how SMES could emulate it.

The Chameleon’s Survival Strategies and Tools	Corresponding Survival Strategies for SMEs
Strategic positioning abilities when hunting and when being hunted.	<b>Strategic positioning:</b> The SME needs to be strategically positioned all the time, for it to circumvent and overcome adversities in its operating environment. Following the idea that the system cannot operate effectively without its environment, strategic positioning becomes very important to the business.

Figure 14

Figure 15 presents the response rates to the set of questions that sought to test the organisation’s compliance with the strategic positioning attribute of the chameleon.

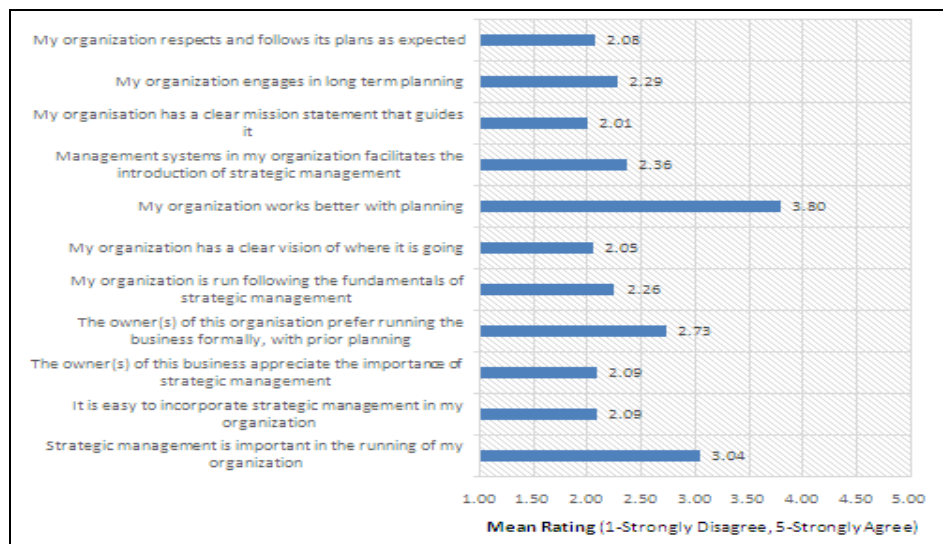


Figure 15

SMEs needed to appreciate that in order to attain effective survival and sustainability; they had to desist from operating without considering the environment around them. For this reason strategic positioning, strategic alignment and the achievement of strategic fit were pre-requisites for sustainable survival in business. The difficulties they faced in incorporating strategic management in their business activities and the lack of distinct visions and missions, all worked together against their prosperity. In the interviews the researcher found out that SMEs that had adopted strategic management effectively tended to prosper and grew more meaningfully than those that were run in a haphazard manner. Financial institutions and Government agencies that did business with SMEs also concurred that entrepreneurs who had mainstreamed strategic management in their businesses tended to do well, managing to pay back their loans and borrowing some more with ease. Judging from the responses to questions in this cluster, SMEs seemed to fail the test of the Chameleon survival strategy model.

#### 4. Strategic Management Challenges to SMEs

From the findings of the questionnaire survey and the interviews conducted, the researcher extracted key challenges and problems that SMEs needed to overcome for them to be able to incorporate strategic management in their value chains. A comparative analysis of the response rates to the questionnaire survey and the qualitative data obtained during the interviews enabled the development of a balanced analysis. From the research process it was observed that it was advantageous to use quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. The challenges faced by SMEs in the sample are outlined below.

##### 4.1. Lack of adequate knowledge and capacity

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative findings of the research revealed that SME business owners lacked adequate knowledge of what strategic management entailed. This came out in their confirmation of the need for training as well as their lack of appreciation of the fundamental principles of strategic management. Their lack of appreciation of what strategic management entailed, made it difficult for them to effectively incorporate it in their value chains. Due to the fact that some entrepreneurs started their businesses out of necessity, without having received any kind of business management training, the majority of them lacked the capacity to introduce strategic management. Without capacity building, entrepreneurs who would have not been to management school would always find it difficult to adopt strategic management in their organisations. Some entrepreneurs confirmed that they had heard about it but explained that they did not have the capacity to incorporate it in their businesses.

##### 4.2. Use of inappropriate management systems

The management systems applied by SMEs in the study made the introduction of strategic management very difficult or impossible. Key informants from stakeholders supporting SMEs, employees and some entrepreneurs confirmed this fact. Failure to establish standardised operational structures and systems and to motivate staff as well as the tendency to employ staff without well-structured contracts among other tendencies, made any form of futuristic or strategic planning difficult to sustain.

##### 4.3 Poor Leadership Styles

After listening to the testimonies of employees on the leadership styles used by entrepreneurs, the researcher deduced that this was one of the major impediments to the adoption of strategic management by SMEs. In the majority of cases in the interviews, entrepreneurs controlled their businesses at personal level without taking best practice business leadership principles into consideration. In some businesses the owner took up almost all the key roles in the business; from being the cashier, the accountant, and the head of procurement to being the head of marketing. This lack of delegation skills made strategic management, which calls for leaders to empower those around them, a very difficult option.



#### *4.4. Lack of transparency and formal guidelines.*

Business owners were described by their employees as lacking transparency in the way the organisation was run. Due to the lack of formal guidelines decisions were more whimsical; rather than logical and consistent with the needs of the organisation.

#### *4.5. Failure to separate the organisation from personal business*

SME owners failed to separate the business of the organisation from their personal lives. Due to this tendency, strategic management was very difficult to adopt given the need for the business processes to be systematic and consistent with the vision.

#### *4.6. Failure to link up with stakeholders*

The research found out that entrepreneurs were not in touch with the various initiatives that had been put in place in their favour by stakeholders, including government. The tendency to operate independently without linking up with developments in their environments, made SMEs continue to go round in circles without introducing any new strategies, consistent with the dictates from the business environment.

#### *4.7. Negative Perception of Strategic Management*

When asked why it was difficult for them to adopt strategic management, some entrepreneurs explained that it was a theoretical approach, which did not work in practical scenarios. Some perceived strategic management as a waste of time and the preserve of business persons who are educated. Because of these negative perceptions, the adoption of strategic management was quite a difficult decision, unless entrepreneurs were effectively sensitised of its benefits.

#### *4.8. Lack of political will*

Some employees stated that SME owners lacked the political will to introduce strategic management in their businesses, despite knowing the benefits they stand to enjoy from this move. Some of the conditions necessary for the establishment of strategic management, which include the need for a logical structure, employee role clarity and a professional approach to business management, made its introduction quite a significant obstacle to some entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs who were not willing to let-go some of their powers and allowed the organisation to move in a professional way, found it difficult to accept the introduction of strategic management.

#### *4.9. Lack of focus*

Owing to the fact that some SMEs lacked a clear vision and mission to guide them towards specific objectives and goals, it was difficult for them to appreciate the value of incorporating strategic management in their organisations. Key informants stated that some SMEs had the tendency to shift from one line of business to another and that their planning was not futuristic. Attempts to promote the adoption of strategic management were jeopardised by such characteristics among SMEs.

#### *4.10. Ineffective financial management*

Strategic management advocates for a systematic approach to the management of funds, which is aligned to the visions and missions at hand. Lack of transparency in the management of funds made strategic management difficult to adopt, given that this is a strategic requirement.

#### *4.11. Lack of employee motivation*

Due to the poor human resources management strategies applied in SMEs, there was low employee morale and lack of motivation. In view of the fact that strategic management should be a team effort, for as long as employees were not well motivated, strategic management remained very difficult to introduce in SMEs. In organisations where employees did not have fixed contracts as evidenced by the findings and where human resources management was not seriously considered, strategic management would be almost impossible to introduce.

### **5. Conclusion**

The analysis of findings from the research, led to the discovery of the challenges that SMEs faced in their efforts to incorporate strategic management in their businesses. The challenges, which mainly emanated from the SMEs' internal environments, needed to be reviewed by all stakeholders working towards the support and empowerment of SMEs. Using the Chameleon Survival Strategy Model test, the majority of businesses failed to match the strategic management standard of the chameleon, thus pointing to the absence of strategic management in their value chains. It is recommended that Entrepreneurs and stakeholders supporting SMEs take into consideration the findings of this research to enhance their efforts towards the achievement of strategic management best practices in the SMEs sector.

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