Leading through servant-hood in the Democratc Republic of the Congo

The African context

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ABSTRACT

The African continent demands true leaders who can change the patterns of how actions had been performed and who can put the continent on the path of development. How can true leaders emerge since the continent is faced with so many crises on every hand? To answer this question the article briefly compares and contrasts characteristics commonly and universally recognised to leaders. This analysis will assist in determining whether there is a difference between characteristics portrayed by leaders among different cultures. In this article, it is found that different cultures have different conceptions of what leadership should entail. The critical question in cross-cultural analyses of managerial influences is whether individuals' responses to organisational practices are more or less universal. Leadership is a scarcity in Africa and that is because of some institutional and structural constraints which emanate from the lack of effective leaders. Considering the current configuration of the African continent, the use of the servant-leader model becomes relevant. The servant-leader model, if well applied, can assist African leaders to reverse the dark picture that portrays the performance of the continent and enable them to place the continent on the path of development and prosperity.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders throughout the world have emerged for a particular purpose. This phenomenon might be intended to either yield results that reflect positively or negatively on the reality of society. The world has known numerous leaders some of them are remembered for the way in which they shaped their societies and others are remembered for the way in which they somehow destroyed their respective nations. However, the word *leadership* has several meanings. It can refer to a social process, a personal quality, a role in groups and organisations and, when used

as a collective noun, to those responsible for the destiny of country or a company (Sadler 2003:171). Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes (Daft 2008:4). The African continent demands true leaders who can change the patterns of how actions had been done and put the continent on the path of development. How can true leaders emerge since the continent is faced with so many crises? Africa is tested by all sorts of challenges ranging from political instability, wars, rebellions, corruption and poverty which have a negative effect on the performance of leaders. Considering what has been happening on the continent, is it proper to talk of a concept such as African leadership? If it exists, what does it entail? To answer these questions the article briefly compares and contrasts characteristics commonly and universally recognised in relation to leaders. This analysis will assist in determining whether there is a difference between characteristics portrayed by leaders across cultures. It is in this context that one will be able to depict the gap as well as the strengths in the African leadership and identify the role leaders can play in shaping the future of the continent.

In this article it is argued that the challenge of any leader is to balance personal ambition with service. This challenge is pronounced particularly in the African context as the continent is mainly faced with leaders that struggle with balancing personal ambition with service to their respective communities. In order for the continent to experience a leadership that is effective, the article suggests the servant-leader model which should be promoted. Servant-hood places the ideals and mission of an institution above personal ambition and self-preservation. Applied in the African context, the servant-leader's model can help leaders become selfless and strive to put the continent on the path of sustainable development. Leaders are vital to any organisation and their role is even greater considering the needs of the African continent which is left far behind in terms of development compared to other parts of the world.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Most work in respect of styles of leadership has been based on two early studies. One of these on behaviour was carried out in 1939 and 1940 by two American researchers, White and Lippitt (1959), and is now regarded as one of the classical experiments in social psychology. Their aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of different ways of exercising the leadership role. In their first experiment they compared two contrasting ways of behaving or styles of leadership – the autocratic and the democratic. These terms largely speak for themselves; the autocratic leader takes decisions and imposes them on the group, expecting group members to put them into effect without questioning the reasons for them. The democratic leader, on the other hand, encourages the members of his or her group to share the decision making process and sees him- or herself as a co-ordinator of group effort, rather than as the decision maker. In a subsequent experiment a third style was also examined which was described as *laissez-faire*. This third type of leader, as the use of the term indicates, plays a passive role in group affairs, and normally interacts with group members only on their initiative (Sadler 2003:61). Therefore, leadership behaviour varies along a continuum and that, as one move away from the autocratic extreme the amount of subordinate participation and involvement in decision making increases. They also suggest that the kind of leadership represented by the democratic extreme of the continuum will be rarely encountered in formal organisations.

Common sense suggests that there will be some situations in which each of the above styles is likely to be more appropriate than the others (Tannenbaum & Schmidt 1958). The traits and characteristics outlined in this article are based only on two leadership styles, namely, the autocratic and democratic leadership. The focus on these two styles is motivated by the fact that in most countries there is either autocratic rule or democracy. Only the context and cultural background bring a difference in the application of each style.

UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership characteristics can be classified following two leadership approaches, namely, the trait approach and the behaviour approach. It is essential to examine each of these approaches before identifying some of the leadership characteristics that are recognised to leaders globally.

Trait approach

Early efforts to understand leadership success focused on the personal characteristics of a leader, such as intelligence, honesty, self-confidence, and appearance. Research early in the twentieth century examined leaders who had achieved a level of greatness, and hence became known as the *Great man approach*. Fundamental to this theory was the idea that some people are born with traits that make them natural leaders. The *Great Man approach* sought to identify the traits leaders possessed that distinguished them from people who were not leaders. Generally, research found only a weak relationship between personal traits and leader success. Indeed, the diversity of traits that effective leaders possess indicates that leadership ability is not necessarily a genetic endowment (Daft 2008:38).

Behaviour approach

Rather than looking at an individual's personal traits, the behaviour approach argues that anyone who adopts the appropriate behaviour can be a good leader. Diverse research programmes on leadership behaviour have sought to uncover the behaviour that leaders engage in rather than what traits a leader possesses. Behaviour can be learned more readily than traits, enabling leadership to be accessible to all. According to Daft (2008:43-44), the behaviour approach is characterised by two leadership styles, namely, autocratic and democratic. An autocratic leader is one who tends to centralise authority and derive power from position, control of rewards, and coercion. A democratic leader delegates authority to others, encourages participation, relies on subordinates' knowledge for completion of tasks, and depends on subordinates' respect for influence. Based on these two approaches, the next section identifies some of the commonly acknowledged characteristics of leaders.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS

Since 1983 James M. Kouzes and Barry Z Posner have been conducting research on personal best-leadership experiences, and they have discovered that there are countless examples of

how leaders mobilise others to get extraordinary actions performed in virtually every arena of organised activity. They have found them [leaders] in profit-based firms and non-profit organisations, manufacturing and services, government and business, health care, education and entertainment, and work and community service. Leaders reside in every city and every country, in every position and every place. They are employees and volunteers, young and old, women and men. Leadership knows no racial or religious bounds, no ethnic or cultural borders. Exemplary leadership is found everywhere. From their analysis of thousands of personal-best leadership experiences, they have discovered that ordinary people who guide others along pioneering journeys follow rather similar paths. Though each experience examined was unique in expression, every case followed remarkably similar patterns of action. They have forged these common practices into a model of leadership, and they offer it as guidance for leaders as they attempt to keep their own bearings and steer others toward peak achievements (Kouzes & Posner 2007:14). Furthermore, Kouzes and Posner uncovered five practices common to personal best-leadership experiences. They insist that when getting extraordinary actions performed in organisations, leaders engage in these five practices of exemplary leadership, namely, model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner 2007:14). The abovementioned attributes can be found in autocratic as well as democratic leaders and they may be applied across cultures and regions. Be it in Africa or elsewhere, the practice of leadership remains the same; only the context and the circumstances vary.

According to Den Hartog *et al.* (1999), different cultural groups may have different conceptions of what leadership in organisations should entail, i.e. different leadership prototypes or culturally endorsed implicit theories of leadership (CLTs). In some cultures, one might need to take strong decisive action to be seen as a leader, whereas in other cultures consultation and a participative approach may be a prerequisite. Following from such different conceptions, the evaluation and meaning of various types of leader behaviour and characteristics may also strongly vary among cultures. For instance, in a culture endorsing an authoritarian style, leader sensitivity might be interpreted as weak, whereas in cultures endorsing a more nurturing style, the same sensitivity is likely to prove essential for effective leadership.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

In the 1990s there was a growing interest in both similarities and differences in leadership within different cultures (Bass 1990). A basic assumption in this interest is, in the words of Steers, Porter and Bigley (1996:423), that "no nation or culture has a monopoly on the best ways of doing something. This is especially so when it comes to understanding motivation and leadership at work." The critical question in cross-cultural analyses of managerial influences is whether individuals' responses to organisational practices are more or less universal.

Leadership styles are more varied in the United States of America (USA) today than in Asia. Mills (2005) stresses that in the USA there are five prominent styles: directive, participative, empowering, charismatic and celebrity (superstar). The first four reflect how an executive deals with subordinates in the organisation; the final one is directed at people outside the organisation. The role models available for business leadership in the different regions of the

world are significant. In America, with its long standing experience with professional business leadership, the most readily available role model for the head of a company is the corporate CEO. In China and Chinese-related businesses it is the head of the family. In France it remains the military general. In Japan it is the consensus builder. In Germany currently it is the coalition builder. However, Mills (2005) insists that there are nine key qualities that research shows people seek in a successful leader: passion, decisiveness, conviction, integrity, adaptability, emotional toughness, emotional resonance, self-knowledge, and humility. The emotionalism that goes with passion is more common in the USA than elsewhere. Europeans see it as a sort of business evangelicalism and are very suspicious of it. Decisiveness is common to effective executives in all countries. In this regard, European and Japanese chief executives are the most consensus-oriented and Chinese and American top executives are more likely to make decisions personally and with their own accountability. Conviction is common to all. Integrity is a complex characteristic very much determined by national cultures. What is honest in one society is not in another, and *vice versa*.

Adaptability is a pronounced characteristic of American leadership generally. It is less common and less valued in Asia and Europe. It will be needed everywhere soon enough. Emotional toughness is common to all top executives; Americans spend more time trying not to show it. Emotional resonance, the ability to grasp what motivates others and appeal effectively to it, is most important in the United States and Europe at this point in time. It will become more important in Asia as living standards improve, knowledge workers become more important, professional management is in greater demand, and CEOs have to compete for managerial talent. Self-knowledge is important in avoiding the sort of over-reach so common in America; it is a less common virtue in America than in Asia, and is a strength of the Asian executive. Humility is a very uncommon trait in the American CEO. It is sometimes found in Asia. It is often a trait of the most effective leaders, as it was in the best-respected of all American political leaders, Abraham Lincoln (Mills 2005). Leadership in East Asia is less likely to be withdrawn or diluted as a result of follower dissatisfaction, or through lack of technical competence. This is consistent with the higher levels of power distance which characterise most East Asian societies, with patrimonial family structures and such cultural features as filial piety (Hofstede 1980). All of these factors contribute to the wide social distance separating leaders from followers. Goals and means for their attainment are decided by leaders and are carefully and humanely imposed. There is little involvement of followers and little expectation on their part that this will occur. The power and authority of the leader are accepted as right and proper. Hierarchy is viewed as the natural way to order social relations. There is "conformity to the 'natural' order of power relations" (Kirkbride *et al.* 1991:368).

Durcan (1994) argues that leadership in the United Kingdom is not the same as leadership in Sweden, France or Spain. To engage in the same behaviour patterns regardless of context is to risk failure and humiliation. To use the same leadership processes without regard to national context is to risk at least mild misunderstanding and private amusement. At worst, it risks a fundamental but unrecognised clash of values which can only rebound to the disadvantage of all parties. Sadler (2003:129–130) insists that moving outside the culture with which one is familiar, the expectations created by this process frequently are not met. Differences of language and concept make it difficult, even in Western Europe, to develop a common understanding of the meaning of leadership.

As with Asia and the West, it is unrealistic to suppose that much of what can be stated about leadership will apply equally across the whole vast continent of Africa, even if one has to confine research only to the nations generally referred to as *south of the Sahara*. Given the cultural heterogeneity of many African countries, similar dangers exist in relation to individual nations (Adigun 1995). According to Hale and Fields (2007:400–401), traditional Sub-Saharan African leadership centres on the concept of kingship. Masango (2003) points out that the hierarchy in African society is well defined, with the king at the top of the structure. However, kingship in pre-colonial times was not the autocratic dictatorship that appeared in the colonial and post-colonial periods (Banutu-Gomez 2001; Masango 2003; Williams 2003). Rather, in earlier periods, followers expected the king to function as a servant to the clan, tribe or community (Williams 2003). In essence, the kingdom was more important than the king. Historical examples document the removal of kings who became a detriment to the kingdom (Banutu-Gomez 2001; Williams 2003). The king used influence to build consensus (Banutu-Gomez 2001; Masango 2003). Finally, the king was the religious leader and guardian of the kingdom's religious heritage (Rugege 1994). In contrast, contemporary Sub-Saharan Africans seem to want leaders who are strategy- and goal-directed, especially if their strategic objectives address social and economic issues. One earns leadership status through demonstrating good character, competency, compassion, justice and wholeness. Decision-making should be participatory and leaders should provide spiritual and moral guidance (Jones 2002; Okumo 2002; Masango 2003; Nyabadza 2003; Sunwabe 2004). In practice, it appears that both traditional and contemporary Sub-Saharan African leadership models include such characteristics as earning credibility through competence, being visionary, using participatory decision-making, mentoring followers and building community through service. To this end, one can surely reiterate the fact that leadership characteristics remain the same throughout the world but the approach used differs, based on the context and cultural background. This article focuses on the practice of leadership in the African context. It is therefore critical that the next section examines leadership reality on the African continent.

LEADERSHIP IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

According to Brautignan (1996:89), leadership is a scarcity in Africa. One basic problem is an institutional constraint: the nature of African political regimes. Leaders and followers are both ensnared by the politics of patronage, and society currently offers few countervailing forces. As long as leaders make arbitrary policy decisions not based on careful analysis and rule mainly through patrimonial ties rather than rational-legal norms, there will be little demand at the top for analytical capacity, technical skills, and good management in public administration. According to Wohlgemuth *et al.* (1998:21), qualities of leadership have had difficulties in developing under the circumstance provided by the post-colonial public administration systems. The public service has its roots in the administrative systems that were introduced by the colonial powers. The administrative system's historical legacy is still strong and has perhaps deepened through the development experience of most African societies after independence. Characteristic of these organisations is that they are never compatible with surrounding social and cultural environment. The most important

consequence of this historical legacy is that the conditions for an effective leadership are difficult to realise within the existing organisational and institutional traditions. Furthermore, Kuye (2011:182) argues therefore that the nature of African leadership is a problem in terms of development. There should be a universal set of values that African nations need to adopt in terms of leadership. For instance be it democratic or patriarchal, transparent, the respect of human rights and the rule of law should be adopted as well as commitment to the people. While the world prescribes democracy as the only form of good governance, where other forms of leadership such as in one party states and patriarchy manifests themselves in Africa, the aim should be to entrench the universal values of transparent, accountable leadership and the respect of human rights.

Africa needs leaders. Strong leaders committed to change are one of the key drivers to progress. Developing the capabilities of leaders at all levels and in all spheres: political, the public sector, business and civil society are critical to African led sustainable development. This implies that good leaders honour the security of the state and of the person, the rule of law, good education and health services, and a framework conducive to economic growth. They ensure effective arteries of commerce and enshrine personal and human freedoms. They empower civil society and protect the environmental commons. Crucially, good leaders also provide their citizens with a sense of belonging to a national enterprise (Rotberg 2004:17). Good leaders help people to make their dreams come true. The main goal of leadership is to accomplish useful and desirable goals that benefit the people being led. Therefore, the task of becoming a truly balanced leader in current highly competitive global marketplace is not for the faint hearted. Balanced leadership requires men and women to be very clear in their focus, know themselves well, and courageously make the right decisions on behalf of their followers, customers, shareholders, and communities, at times standing alone against the tide of popular management philosophy. This kind of leadership requires a genuine love of others and the acceptance of accountability as a leader, all the while protecting one's most enduring investment, the family (Donald Krause 1997:8; Gill 2006:12; Henderson 2007).

The emphasis on service to others has underpinned many of the quality management change programmes in the last two decades. Within the leadership field, there has been considerable emphasis on the concept of the leader as the servant of others – servant leadership (Greenleaf 1998; Blanchard 1999). This focus on meeting the needs of others or wanting the best for other people is described by some as *love* (Marcic 1997:14). A true leader needs to serve a particular purpose which might be the promotion of the betterment of the living conditions of citizens rather than serving a leader's own selfish interests. Therefore, the article proposes the servant-leader approach to leadership. In the previous sections, it was stated that leadership can be democratic or autocratic depending on the context and circumstances, but what is essential is for a leader to serve a purpose within an organisation or a society or to be at the service of others.

THE SERVANT-LEADER'S MODEL

Robert Greenleaf, the founder of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, conceptualised the idea of the servant leader. In his vision (Greenleaf 1977:89), the leader is first seen as

a servant to others. The servant assumes a non-focal position within a group, providing resources and support without an expectation of acknowledgement. Through repeated servant behaviours, these individuals eventually emerge as pivotal for group survival and are thrust into a leadership position. Greenleaf suggests that these people are not initially motivated to be leaders, but assume this position in response to the urgings of others and in response to the need for group success.

The servant-leader model views a leader as a servant of his/her followers. It places the interest of followers before the self-interest of a leader, emphasises personal development and empowerment of followers. The servant-leader is a facilitator for followers to achieve a shared vision. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the provision of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organisation and those served by the organisation. A servant-leader views leadership not as position or status, but as an opportunity to serve others, to develop them to their full potential (Greenleaf 1977; Smith Montagno & Kuzmenko 2004:81–82).

Despite the vast array of terms, various formulations of servant leadership have employed, three major descriptors originally employed by Greenleaf (1977) are cornerstones of servant leadership. These are:

Service to followers, an organisation or society. Based on the alternative descriptions of servant-leadership noted above, this dimension may include service-orientation, follower development, organisational stewardship, follower empowerment, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, helping subordinates grow and putting subordinates first.

Humility: putting the success of followers ahead of the leader's personal gain. This dimension may include relational power, altruistic calling, emotional healing, moral love, altruism, credibility, voluntary subordination, authentic self, transcendental spirituality, emotional healing, and behaving ethically from the various alternative servant leadership formulations above.

Vision: having foresight combined with the ability to communicate vision to, and influence followers in developing a shared vision for an organisation. This dimension includes wisdom, persuasive mapping, influence, transforming influence, credibility, creating value for the community, and conceptual skills from the various alternative servant leadership formulations above (Hale & Fields 2007:399).

Spears (1995) cited in Sadler (2003:163–164) identifies the following 10 characteristics of the servant-leader from his study of Greenleaf's work:

- Listening: servant-leader makes a deep commitment to listening intently to the vibes of others. They also listen to their own *inner voice*, seeking to understand the messages that their own bodies, minds and spirits are telling them. They spend time in reflection;
- Empathy: striving to understand others; not rejecting them as people, while not accepting their behaviour or performance;
- Healing: in the sense of helping people to cope with emotional pain and suffering;
- Awareness: sensitivity to what is going on, including self-awareness;
- Persuasion: seeking to convince others of the rightness of a course of action rather than achieve compliance through coercion;
- Conceptualisation: the ability to think in conceptual terms, to stretch the mind beyond day-to-day considerations;

- Foresight: the ability to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present and the likely future consequences of decisions;
- Stewardship: seeing one's role in terms of holding in trust the wealth and resources of the organisation for the benefit of society;
- Commitment to the growth of people: valuing people beyond their contributions as employees and showing concern for their personal, professional and spiritual growth; and
- Building community: creating a true sense of community among those who work in an organisation.

Looking at the current configuration of the African continent, the use of the servant-leader model becomes relevant. Most countries on the continent have experienced poor leadership. Despite the availability of abundant natural resources few countries have managed to progress since their access to independence. The servant-leader model, if well applied, can assist African leaders to reverse the dark picture that portrays the performance of the continent and pave a way for the development of Africa as a continent. Although the bigger picture regarding the continent is not bright, it is necessary to note that some countries have experienced the type of leaders who can be qualified as servant-leaders. The outstanding examples are, namely, Tanzania with Julius Nyerere, Botswana with Sir Seretse Khama, South Africa with Nelson Mandela, Nigeria with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, Mali with Amadou Toumani Toure, Senegal with Abdou Diouf, to name but few.

CONCLUSION

The most significant contribution leaders make, is not simply to the current bottom line; it is to the long-term development of people and institutions so they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow. In this article it was stressed that the challenge of any leader is to balance personal ambition with service. This challenge is pronounced particularly in the African context as the continent is mainly faced with leaders that struggle with balancing personal ambition with service to their respective communities. In order for the continent to experience a leadership that is effective, the article suggested the servant-leader model which needs to be promoted. Servant-hood places the ideals and mission of an institution above personal ambition and self-preservation. Applied in the African context, the servant-leader's model can help leaders become selfless and strive to put the continent on the path of sustainable development. Leaders are vital to any organisation and their role is even greater considering the needs of the African continent which is left far behind in terms of development compared to other parts of the world.

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