

Perspectives on African leadership in the spirit of *Ubuntu*

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ABSTRACT

There is a surge of literature focusing on African leadership around the world. Nelson Mandela has stood out as an African icon and an international leader amidst the challenges of a globalised world. There is a quest to strike a balance with finding a leader with charisma and passion, and at the same time, finding a brand of leadership and strategic thinking to lead Africa new horizons. African leadership is about African solutions to local problems, and to reconscientise and rejuvenate the hearts and minds of people regarding the richness of collectiveness with an emphasis on Ubuntu (humanness and moral regeneration) and “Umoja” (togetherness). The appreciation that “humanity finds fulfillment only in community with others” and restoration of the moral fibre of leadership can serve as a repository of knowledge and centre of learning in the cornerstone of good governance in African leadership. This article examines the concept and practice of African leadership in the South African context, and on the African continent. The emphasis of this discussion is not only a conceptual understanding of African leadership, but a focus, amongst others, on the leadership competencies, professional values of responsibility and accountability, spirit of collectiveness, humanness and social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a unique continent. For Africa to survive and prosper, wise, able, visionary, ethical and compassionate leadership must prevail. Leadership and good governance are two key



elements that will ensure that Africa is a worthy, respectable and net-contributing player in this global arena (Khoza 2009:2).

The commencing point on the journey to African leadership is to understand the richness of Africa: its history, culture, beliefs, diversity and developmental initiatives. African leadership is undoubtedly the willingness to serve unreservedly (Abdulai 2008:2–3).

The focus of this article is to analyse the concept and practice of African leadership within a good governance perspective. In addition, the argument encapsulates leadership competencies and values in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. A model leaning on an African leadership paradigm is proposed on the collective vision of contemporary African culture.

WHAT IS AFRICAN LEADERSHIP?

The call and challenge to the new generation of African leadership is not to repeat the mistakes of post-colonial African leaders, or current and future generations that will not treat them with respect and dignity. They are therefore, challenged to build the new Africa, a reascent Africa – this will be an Africa where the content of its people’s character is more significant than the colour of their skins. An African leader is one who truly and sincerely believes that the destiny of Africa and its people lie in the ability of Africans to find solutions to Africa’s problems. This new profile of leadership must understand that until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunting will always glorify the hunter. It is, therefore, a challenge to them to ensure that the traditional story is no longer history and when all is said and done, no one, however, magnanimous, concerned, caring or highly intelligent, can develop Africa for Africans. This onerous task is that of Africans and its leadership alone (Abdulai 2008:2-3; <http://www/sblunisa.ac.za/content.php?section=28&article=334>).

DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

Throughout human history, the question of leaders and the quality of leadership have been matters of critical importance. Hence, the need for African leadership that has the competence to comprehend and respond to global threats, challenges and opportunities, and the ability to counterbalance them against domestic challenges, needs and aspirations, is absolutely crucial. The role played by leadership during far-reaching changes, is invaluable. Political leaders are the primary holders and distributors of power and resources with capacity to cause and sustain conflicts, mitigate against them, transform or resolve these conflicts and play decisive roles in establishing peace and harmony. These leaders could be a valuable resource in promoting and upholding African leadership with commitment, integrity and vision (<http://www.dst.gov.za/media-room/speeches/the-development-of-political-african-leaders>).

One must take note that the world is in an era of continuous change, and change is a fact of life. Changes create fears and insecurity but also challenges and possibilities. What distinguishes successful leadership from poor leadership is the ability of leaders to anticipate change and to respond to it effectively. The survival of African leadership depends to a large extent, amongst others, *firstly* on the ability to respond to the challenges facing

Africa, and *secondly*, to the global changes, challenges, possibilities and opportunities in the developed world.

Clearly, a new breed of African leaders is needed in Africa. It is leaders who would understand the critical importance of good governance, accountability and transparency in both democratic and development processes, honesty, integrity and a vision of a better life for all. African leadership involves the recognition of the importance of generational linkages, and commitment to the development and sustenance of the synergy between the generations. One can emphasise that Africa needs leaders who respect and are respected, who trust and are trusted by those who elected them, and are secure and confident in their leadership. Africa needs leaders who have reason to take pride in their accomplishments <http://www.dst.gov.za/media-room/speeches/the-development-of-political-african-leaders>.

Safavi (1981:319) cited in (Nkomo 2006:5) argues that “the inability of African nations to train capable managers for major institutions has been the main inhibitive factor to real economic and social development”. One of the initiatives in building African leadership in South Africa has led to the establishment of The African Leadership Group. At the launch in July 2006, President Thabo Mbeki stated that the African Leadership Group *was the answer to the question, and many other challenges facing the continent*. The group *articulates and defines the skills of great leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Wilem De Klerk and Mahatma Gandhi*. The African Leadership Group is referred to as co-habitational leadership as this is a ***form of leadership that seeks not to mould followers, but to mould leaders***. The skills, lessons and experiences are accessible and applicable to the leaders today. The African Leadership Group has learned that leaders succeed when their ethnic and traditional leadership are integrated to address modern day challenges (BuaNews 2006:1).

UBUNTU AS A MODEL FOR AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

The African leadership paradigm is characterised by emphasising people and their dignity and is entrenched in a collectivist perspective (which is reflected in the concept of Ubuntu), which means “I am because we are; I can only be a person through others” it is unlike the “self serving and individualist paradigm of the West, which is described by Hofstede (1985) in (April and Ephraim 2006:4) where *strong individuals* and *achievers* are valued in a society. In his report Hostede (1985) cited in April and Ephraim (2006:3) suggests that “national cultures could be clustered along the lines of their similarities across a range of variables, these included a sense of individuality or collectivity”. According to Hodsted’s (1985) theory the term *collectivism* refers to a preference for a tightly-knit social framework in which individuals can look up to their community or relatives for loyalty which differs from *individualism* which is defined as a “loosely knit social framework in a society”. Hence the authors (April and Ephraim 2006:3) mention that the concept of *Ubuntu* goes beyond a sense of loyalty to something that is more deep-seated i.e. a sense of belonging and purpose that comes through in the sense of community. Hence the key values entrenched in African leadership are as follows:

- respect for the dignity of others;
- group solidarity – an injury to one is an injury to another;



- teamwork – none of us is greater than all of us;
- services to others in the spirit of harmony and
- interdependence – each one of us needs all of us (Mbigi 2002:20) cited in (April and Ephraim 2006:3).

The African Management Philosophy is a field of study that embraces African ideas and experience. Edoho cited in Nkomo (2006:8) defines African management philosophy as the practical way of thinking about how to effectively run organisations in public or private sectors based on *African* ideas, and in terms of how social and economic life is actually experienced in the region. Such thinking must be interwoven with the daily existence and experience in Africa and its contextual reality.

An important point of consideration is that the proponents of African management philosophy are responding to the *historical domination of Eurocentric leadership and management practices in Africa* (Horwitz *et al.* in Nkomo (2006:9). Further, these scholars argue that *these practices are inadequate* as the leadership and management challenges are different in terms of the cultural, political, economic and social context (Blunt & Jones 1997; Jaeger 1990; Jackson 2004) in (Nkomo 2006:9). Many critics have argued about imposing Western management thought and practice in Africa, as it is argued that it is unrealistic to apply a Western functional paradigm of human resource management and transformational leadership in Africa, which is different in cultural and economic contexts (Nkomo 2006:9).

The proponents of African management philosophy take into consideration the history of Africa and acknowledge the indigenous knowledge systems which resulted in effective management during the pre-colonial era Edho *et al.* cited in Nkomo (2006:9). African management thought is considered to reflect traditionalism, communalism, co-operative teamwork, and mythology, for example, communalism of African management is of the belief that the individual is not alone, but belongs to the community (Nkomo 2006:9). It is also useful to understand that African management thought is also characterised by the individual's relation to nature and supernatural beings and between individuals and ancestors Mbigi cited in Nkomo (2006:12).

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is seen as an important value of the African culture that forms the basis of a management that is consistent with how African people think and behave towards each other (Mangaliso cited in Nkomo 2006:13). Mangaliso (2001:24) defined *Ubuntu* as humanness—a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another. *Ubuntu* is the foundation for the basic values that manifest themselves in ways in which African people think and behave towards each other and everyone else they encounter. To explore this definition further, according to (Magadlela 2008:1), *South Africa's current conditions of misunderstanding and intolerance of difference, of leadership disconnection with the people and of business misalignment with holistic human development* demands change. He views the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* which means that *each one of us can only effectively exist as fully functioning human beings when we acknowledge the roles that others play in our lives*. This African philosophy embraces the *essence of being human* and a *person is a person through other persons*. Further exploration of this philosophy defines the inherent interconnectedness among individuals as most Nguni languages in South Africa mention: "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" meaning that *a person is a person through other persons or I*

am because we are (Magadla 2008:1). The fundamental principle underlying this principle is on building and sustaining working relationships. The concept of *Ubuntu* (humaneness) is considered to build trust among internal and external stakeholders and using the *Ubuntu* approach will assist local government leaders to meet their service delivery expectations Magadla (2008:2). *Ubuntu* acknowledges the truism that no person is an island, but an integral part of broader society and humankind, and therefore that our individual fortunes are intimately connected to the fortunes of the whole community (Broodryk 2007:15).

It is further stated that managing relationships requires *resonance* so that one can connect emotionally with others as these leaders acknowledge the ability to engage with others and lead with emotional intelligence (Magadla 2008:1).

In summary, *Ubuntu* is a concept that is generally regarded as the foundation of sound human relations in African societies. It is a deep-rooted African philosophy, which places high value of sharing, caring, inclusivity, compassion and communalism (Khoza 2009:3).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

In the development of African leadership it must be noted that the first generation of African leaders faced many daunting challenges including the following (Mangena 2007:4):

- The management of the inherited colonial state machinery, the economy, and the maintenance of law, order and stability and there were not enough Africans with the technical expertise and knowledge to run the modern state. In some countries, the European or Asian minorities were dominant in the economic and commercial sectors.
- The creation of a new political order of peace and stability where people from diverse ethnic, religious, regional and ethnic backgrounds could work together.
- The development of human resource practices and capacity to meet the challenges of the post-colonial governance.
- The formulation of an ideology and common vision in nation-building.
- Obtaining aid and technical assistance needed to attract the foreign investments.
- The promotion of African unity.
- The promotion of decolonisation in the rest of Africa. It must be noted that the first generation of African leaders were conscious of racial domination, oppression and discrimination and the impact it had on the society and they were determined to ensure that the succeeding generation would not suffer the same fate (Mangena 2007:4).

According to (Mangena 2007:6), despite the challenges, the first generation of African leaders failed to respond appropriately and effectively to areas related to the domestic and global changes that have taken place since independence; the utilisation of the inherited colonial state as a vehicle for economic growth; the creation of modern economic institutions relevant to African conditions, adaptable to the changing global patterns in terms of production, technology and markets which could facilitate sustainability; the creation of a democratic and political system that are relevant to the African countries and creating an enabling environment to develop young African leaders. Taking into consideration the challenges and inadequacies faced by the first generation leaders, it is of critical importance for the new 21st



leaders to have understanding of good governance, accountability and transparency in both democratic and development processes, exhibit honesty, integrity and a vision and be able to recognise the importance of generational linkages and sustenance of the synergy between the generations (Mangena 2007:7).

A GENERATION OF AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

As the world is settling into the 21st century and beyond, globalisation becomes inescapable and a new breed of leaders and leadership is needed in Africa. What is needed is African leadership that has the intelligence and capacity to anticipate wisely the possibilities of domestic as well as global, social, economic and political change to comprehend what is significant and effectively respond to it. Africa needs leaders who are skilled and experienced themselves and who value knowledge and information and know where and how to access the advice and expertise from both their indigenous systems and from world systems. The generation of African leaders that is sought is one whose vision, integrity and competence is compatible with African socio-cultural realities and can inspire people to realise such future vision and the synergy between the generations and generational linkages (Mohiddin undated:27–30).

AFRICAN LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

It is essential to view the notion of African leadership from a leadership and governance framework perspective. There is a need for a unique semblance of leadership and governance based on principles such as accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equality and public participation. The following are viewed as important ingredients in the quest for an African leadership and governance framework:

- traditional African leadership;
- transformational leadership;
- situational leadership;
- team leadership; and
- moral and value-based leadership and governance.

What is advocated is that a mixture of the above key aspects or dimensions of African leadership is necessary to give effect to a brand or model of leadership that is different, better or more effective – to forgive and forget, which is part of the *Ubuntu* spirit of individual wellness that is dependent upon the well-being of the collective. It is important to note that these factors contribute to an effective leadership and governance framework and should not operate in isolation from one another.

Concept of Good Governance

According to the Asian Development Bank's concept (2008:1) of governance, four elements namely, Accountability, Participation, Predictability and Transparency are all encompassing.

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation was launched in October 2006 to promote good governance in Africa and published an innovative ranking of governance quality in sub-Saharan Africa in September 2007. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance assessed 48 states in sub-Saharan Africa against a new index of governance indicators (Mo Ibrahim Foundation September 2007). This index is a tool to assess countries against 58 individual measures. The key features outlined in the Ibrahim Index as stated in the (Mo Ibrahim Foundation: September 2007) includes the following:

- **Comprehensiveness:** The large number of measures makes it possible to measure comprehensive assessments;
- **Focus on political goods:** The Index defines governance as the delivery of political goods with measurable outcomes rather than subjective assessments;
- **Geographic coverage:** The Index examines all 48 countries in sub-Sahara;
- **Ranking:** The Index is the first to rank sub-Saharan African countries according to governance quality; and
- **Progressiveness:** The Index seeks to offer improving assessment of governance on an on-going basis.

This assessment tool is valuable as it holds government leaders accountable, thus setting benchmarks for improving the quality of governance in Africa.

AFRICAN LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

According to Ozaralli (in Naidoo 2005:109), leaders should be able to inspire, communicate and operationalise their visions. They ought to understand their tasks and prepare themselves well to manage their departments/portfolios effectively. Ozaralli further argues that it is crucial to promote efficiency and effectiveness in organisations when leaders portray leadership for efficiency, leadership with responsibility and leadership that is transparent and accountable.

Africa needs leaders who are intelligent and respect education; who are skilled or experienced in the art of leading; that value knowledge and information, and know where and how to access the advice and expertise required for effective management. African leadership is based on those who are committed to the promotion of African perspectives on democracy and good governance and development strategies that are compatible with African socio-cultural realities, and who have integrity, vision, competence and can inspire people to realise such future vision. The most desired competence focuses on the type of leadership appropriate to specific circumstances (Mohiddin undated:27–28).

CHALLENGES CONFRONTING THE NEW GENERATION OF AFRICAN LEADERS

There are several challenges confronting African leaders on the African continent. Some of the most pertinent challenges according to (Mohiddin undated:31–2) include:

- consolidating successes and avoiding repetition of past mistakes;



- developing a capable state, that is socially engaged and effective in responding to domestic and global challenges;
- promoting public-private sector partnerships and creating a flexible balance between the efficiency of the market and the availability of public goods and services; and
- managing diversities, preventing violent conflicts, promoting resolution and reconciliation.

The challenges outlined above could serve as building blocks for the promotion of *African Renaissance* and leadership for good governance.

One of South Africa's leadership challenges in the new democracy is combating corruption and other forms of unethical behaviour. The former Minister of Public Services and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi's keynote address at the third National Anti-Corruption Summit in Boksburg in August 2008, addressed the importance of governance and administration in terms of fostering democratic values. She highlighted the words of President Thabo Mbeki who stated that:

Recent years have seen corruption become the misdirected juggernaut of society. In our country, it has succeeded in infesting our shared value system with moral decay and winning the hearts and minds of many a public servant. Not only those who exercise public power but large sections of the citizenry as well have been engulfed by the corrupting tentacles of this wayward beast that is threatening the soul of our nation and the very basis of our democracy.

In presenting some leadership challenges in South Africa, the elimination of corruption, malpractice and anti-social behaviour are some of the challenges facing public sector organisations. It requires the commitment and will of all stakeholders to contribute to the national integrity framework and provide effective leadership and good governance practices.

A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

Prime (in Cox *et al.* 2008:76) identifies three approaches to describe the leadership adopted by leaders in South Africa:

- *Firstly*, Western leadership, which is consistent with the Western value systems, is based on individualism, self-centeredness and competition.
- *Secondly*, Afrocentric leadership which is founded on the belief that the authority of the leader is assumed to be right and results in subordinates having to show respect and obedience to their superiors. It is guided by certain basic, traditional values and principles and emphasises traditionalism, communalism and co-operative teamwork. *Ubuntu* has played a critical part in Afrocentric leadership which is categorised by five core competencies, specifically survival, solidarity, spirit, respect and dignity.
- *Thirdly*, this approach is synergistic inspirational leadership more commonly known as dualistic leadership whereby traditional African leadership practices, values and philosophies are integrated with Western leadership practices, values and philosophies.

Values such as compassion, altruism, caring and sharing in a communal setting, interdependence, inclination towards consensus and consultation are attributes of the African cultural archetype. Some of these norms and values helped shape the advent of democracy in South Africa: wisdom keepers such as Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Nelson Mandela being the ultimate reference points.

We learn from King Shaka ka Senzangakona that there can be no change without challenge and from King Moshoeho of the Basotho that mastering the context from situational analysis is key to leadership success. From one of Madiba’s dictations we learn that a leader is someone who fearlessly bears the consequences of his or her decisions, who does not strive to be popular but walks the road to which he or she is committed.

One of the challenges facing the public service in South Africa’s post-apartheid dispensation is to create sustainable, competent and effective leadership. The challenge facing organisations is that the context in which an organisation and leadership operate is subject to rapid and continuous change (Verwey *et al.* 2003:76). According to Stanek (in Verwey *et al.* 2003:82), global managers should possess five competencies namely, the drive to communicate, broad-based sociability, cultural flexibility, cosmopolitan orientation and a collaborative negotiation style.

INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES FROM THE DEVELOPING WORLD ON PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP

It is useful to draw on perspectives of what are some of public service challenges for public service leaders in the Commonwealth countries. The following discussion provides insights on the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM). According to Draper (2002:4), the

Figure 1 Model depicting the paradigm of African Leadership



Source: Mbigi 2005:219

need for leaders to lead and the dialogue on new leadership and organisations focus on the following:

- The importance of organisational transformation: Focus is on visioning and the need for leaders to develop shared visions, values and beliefs. The importance and the ability to be innovative are also important.
- The importance of learning: Concept of developing and institutionalising learning organisations in private and public sector organisations are highlighted.
- The importance of collaboration: Increasing need for organisations to develop partnerships and to develop networks and alliances to improve service delivery. The concepts of “joined-up government” or being boundary less have emerged as critical features for public services.
- The importance of accountability: Trend towards making managers more accountable, and an increase in “performance based contracts” for senior managers which is demanding a different mindset from managers.
- The importance of responsiveness: This demands more speedy response, as well as a system and process transformation to ensure quality service delivery.

AFRICAN LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

The following African leadership paradigm has a bias towards servant leadership (serving society and stakeholders to the best of one’s ability, and in the process achieve one’s own personal goals). Greenleaf (in Mbigi 2005:219) best articulates the practices of the African leadership paradigm. These practices are as follows:

- *Listening* – listening with regular periods of reflection is essential to the growth of the servant leader and listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s inner voice and seeking to understand what one’s spirit, body and mind are communicating.
- *Empathy* – the servant leader strives to understand and empathise with others. Some of the most successful leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic leaders.
- *Persuasion* – the leader is effective at building consensus within groups and this is the “heart and soul” of African leadership that is embedded in the ancient African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.
- *Healing* – Many people have broken spirits and have suffered emotional hearts. Leaders should realise that they have an opportunity to help “make whole” those with whom they interact. Servant leaders seek to nurture their abilities to “dream great dreams”.
- *Self-discipline* – the management of self discipline is important – doing very ordinary things in an extraordinary manner, thus putting their sincerity on constant display in order to create trust.
- *Consciousness* – leaders must have an inner serenity and a high degree of personal consciousness. High consciousness can only be attained through a personal spiritual journey, by reaching into the depths of our inner spiritual resources to transcend our self interests and contribute to transformation.

A model depicting the paradigm of African leadership is illustrated in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, the universal African leadership style is one of being inspirational and charismatic, thus inspiring a spirit among the subordinates, and adding support for the current mostly philosophical literature on African leadership and an understanding of the leadership relevant to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Africa is capable of producing iconic commendable leadership; a leadership that stands for the truth and affirmation of the good, and whose primary pursuits are noble causes and the common good. This leadership is epitomised by Nelson Mandela; an example of what we might call “at your service leadership”. We must encourage the emergence of a new breed of African leadership. A leadership that is ethical and imbued with a sense of efficacy, integrity and accountability. Leaders who will be known less for what they proclaim and more for what they deliver, less for their clamoring for title and position and more for their expertise and competence. Leaders who will be known less for what they control and more by what they shape. The twenty first century will witness compassionate and visionary leaders who care about their followers and who are dedicated to Africa’s humane and noble cause.

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