

MANAGING IN FAITH

How African executives use faith to guide their actions

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**Gordon Institute
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Abstract

Western management literature seldom considers the role of faith in how executives fulfil their obligations. But on the African continent, faith is a key element of management. A research project conducted by GIBS found that faith informs executives' sense of who they are as individual people, and thereby constitutes an important source of their "psychological capital". Faith also guides how they act as leaders, with many of the elements of servant leadership being in evidence. Finally, where the local institutions are weak, faith also operates as an informal institution that guides executives and their employees about right and wrong actions. Faith is conceptualised in an inclusive way, as belief in a higher power, rather than in terms of specific religion.

But although executives generally acknowledge faith traditions other than their own, they often lack a detailed understanding of the practices of other religions. This means that there is a risk that managing through religious beliefs and principles can serve to divide rather than unite an organisation. Executives are therefore advised to take note of the tremendous power of faith. Their challenge is to create a workplace that acknowledges faith as a potential driver of employee behaviour, but also as a key dimension of diversity, and to create a workplace in which both elements are acknowledged.

Keywords

Inclusiveness

Psychological capital

Servant leadership

Informal institution

Diversity

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How African executives use faith to guide their actions

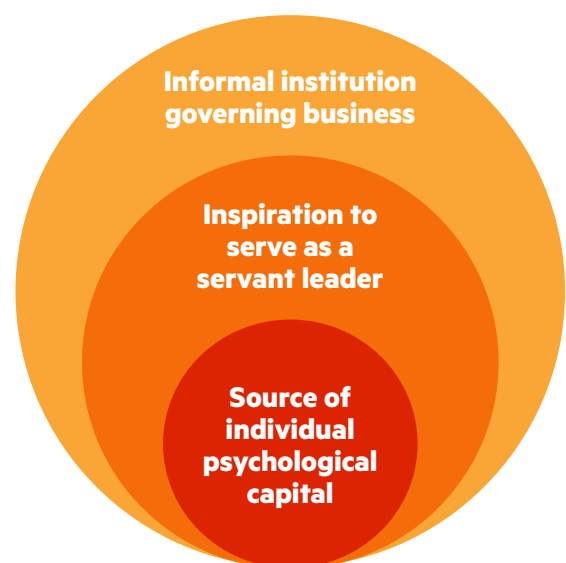
Recently, after the police in Johannesburg successfully apprehended the suspect of a crime, they explained that the victim was on his way back from church, and benefited from the intervention of God. The police spokesperson also explained that police stations across the country are actively leading prayer in communities to help combat crimeⁱ.

How does an executive make sense of this type of “divine intervention programme” of police officers? Are police officers shirking their duty when they claim that they rely on the help of God to combat crime, or are they engaged in an appropriate act of management?

Closer to the business world, various successful entrepreneurs across the African continent ascribe their success to God. Entrepreneurs focusing on areas as diverse as brand management, fashion and traditional foods all place God at the centre of their business successⁱⁱ.

In a recent project on business and management in the wider African context, GIBS confirmed that faith is a central part of the world of work in Africa. We conducted interviews with 92 C-suite executives from five countries: Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. They included Directors of Marketing, Human Resources, Operations and Finance, and of course CEOs.

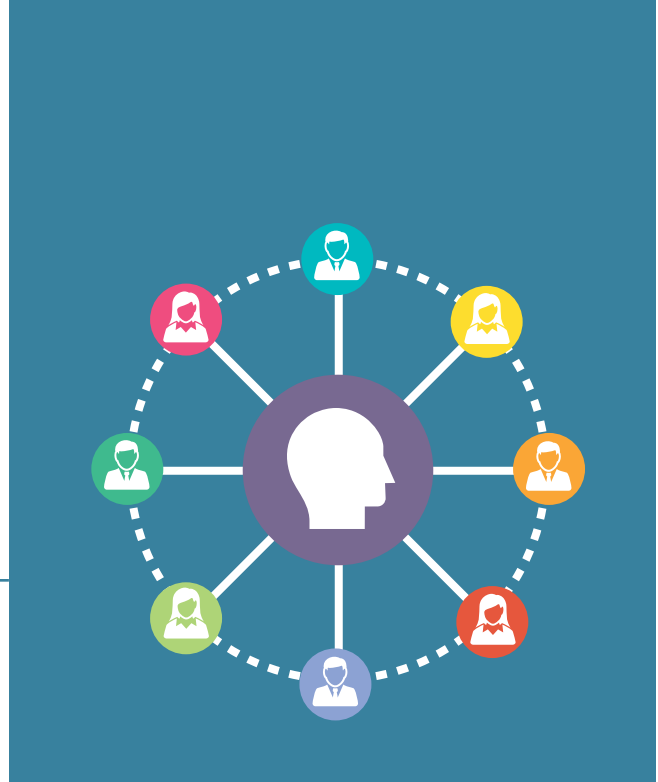
Different functions of faith in business in Africa



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ⁱ https://www.timeslive.co.za.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.timeslive.co.za/amp/news/south-africa/2019-02-14-divine-intervention-may-have-saved-joburg-robbery-victim-say-police/?amp_js_v=0.1#referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s&share=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.timeslive.co.za%2Fnews%2Fsouth-africa%2F2019-02-14-divine-intervention-may-have-saved-joburg-robbery-victim-say-police%2F, accessed February 16 2019

ⁱⁱ <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/283272>, accessed July 27 2019



Companies were both local and foreign, and most of them were multinationals – although they sometimes operated in only two or three other countries. Executives were from financial services companies, retailers and agro-processing companies.

We were not interested in whether the executives were believers; we wanted to understand how they manage their business. Questions were asked about stakeholders like their employees, customers, suppliers and government. Executives were asked about their competitive positioning and key challenges. The executives answered those questions in detail. But as they discussed these and other matters, fully half of them explained how important faith is to their work life.

Western management literature does not talk much about faith. But in the African context, faith matters hugely. The Pew Research Centre found that Africans are overwhelmingly religiousⁱⁱⁱ - and it is likely that faith will also affect business. For a believer, faith informs every moment of every day. We therefore initially struggled to categorise what exactly is the role of faith in business and management in Africa, but eventually identified three main ways in which faith guides the views and actions of African executives.

The first important role of faith is that it helps people to keep on going, even in the face of difficulties. This characteristic has previously been termed “psychological capital”^{iv}. If human capital can be explained as the benefits that you gain from “what you know” and social capital as the benefits to be gained from “who you know”, psychological capital can be explained as the benefits that accrue because of “who you are”. For many managers, their

faith is an important and empowering part of who they are – even though the traditional understanding of psychological capital does not consider faith at all.

The second important role of faith relates to an important role that the executives in our study played – as leaders. Faith not only shapes how they see themselves as individuals, but also how they think of themselves as leaders. In particular, many of the executives explained that their faith guides them in being “servant leaders”^v.

Finally, faith is also important at the organisational and even inter-organisational level. In many ways, executives use a shared faith as an (informal) institution to guide their actions. The Nobel-prize winning scholar of institutions, North, had acknowledged that some form of belief could play some form of role as an institution.^{vi}

The evidence from Africa suggests that he was wrong in his very tentative assessment: faith is actually a key institution.

Because much of management literature has been blind to issues of faith, we first explain how executives define faith. We then discuss the three purposes served by faith, as psychological capital for the individual, as a model of servant leadership for the leader, and as an institution in wider society. We then discuss a potential challenge for executives who use their faith to guide their work actions: faith in a multi-religious world. Where belief matters, it is a potential fault-line that people have very different understandings of God and their relationship to God. We discuss how executives deal with that challenge.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Pew Research Center. 2017. The Changing Global Religious Landscape.

^{iv} Luthans, F., Youssef, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2007). Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge. Oxford University Press.

^v For a review, see Van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant leadership: A review and synthesis. *Journal of management*, 37(4), 1228-1261.

^{vi} North D.C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



Understanding faith

Faith is really important to African executives. Christianity dominates in the regions we visited, and most of the executives we interviewed were Christian. However, a number of executives went to lengths to explain that their conceptualisation of faith encompassed various religions:

We are strong believers that God is with us, and that is our belief, definitely. We believe in some basic texts. Being in Nigeria, we have a mainly Muslim population, Christian and all that, so we do our prayers in each of the religions. (Operations Director, Nigeria, European retail MNC)

We have to have one belief and that belief does not depend on whether you are Muslim or Hindu or Christian. It is knowing that there is a bigger being. (Sales Director, Kenya, Local agro-processing firm)

Indeed, one executive was careful to explain:

Yes, I'm using the word 'spiritual being', because I'm not sure everyone uses God. God is who I am referring to, actually. (Sales Director, Nigeria, Local agro-processing firm)

For the executives in our study, faith seemed to be the conviction that a higher being was guiding their actions, with the assurance that there was reason to how an (unknown) future would unfold. They explained their relationship to the higher being, God, and not in terms of religion or denomination. In fact, executives were very consistent that they believed in a higher power, and that their actions were directed and supported by that divine force:

"Yes, I'm using the word 'spiritual being', because I'm not sure everyone uses God. God is who I am referring to, actually."

I believe in the higher power and therefore the higher power would guide me through the day. (Operations Director, Kenya, South African financial services MNC)

I believe in the divine power [to] help strongly. (CEO, Nigeria, Local financial services firm)

I also believe that it is not about me and me alone. I believe in a higher power that perhaps will push me beyond where I would ordinarily not get to. (Human Resource Director, Botswana, South African financial services MNC)

This understanding of God as a divine being, rather than an understanding based in the teachings of a specific religion, creates the possibility that faith could be a force for inclusion in the workplace. At least at this abstract level, even in a multi-religious workplace, such an inclusive understanding creates the possibility that expressions of faith could unite rather divide people. But in its workings, faith is associated with specific practices and rituals: So what are the specific functions that faith fulfils for African executives?

Faith as a source of psychological capital for the individual

"I know that when I make mistakes, He will drag me out on the other side and I always find myself back on the right path."

Psychological capital is a positive state that individuals have in which they are open to development, and it is argued to consist of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy^{vii}. It is, in essence, "who you are", and for many executives their faith is central to how they understand themselves. This understanding of themselves as believers often translates into a strong sense of purpose:

God put you there to make an impact where you are, as a little speck of dust. You know how privileged you are in the bigger scheme of things. That is what I am. I never take things for granted and I never take things that I am entitled. I am blessed and I am privileged to be there so I must do the best with what I have, where I am every single day of my life. Otherwise, what is the meaning of life? Make a difference where you are. I think it is so important. (CEO, Botswana, South African agri-business MNC)

So for me, a Muslim faith has been part and parcel of who I am, I have been brought up with, what I believe in, what I stand for. (CEO, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

So it makes you to be ... so your faith helps you to be more insightful, more committed, more focussed. (Operations manager, Nigeria, South African financial services MNC)

Many of them explained that they had made choices because of a sense that they were acting under God's direction, and that the confidence they felt to act came from the conviction that God would guide them, and also correct them if they failed to proceed in the right way:

I am grateful to that spiritual force most times [...] The moment I took my role right now in this company, there was something that came up in my head from a meeting and what I heard, inspired me take a drive on that path, but it is looking like it is working right now. (Sales director, Nigeria, Local agro-processing firm)

I know that when I make mistakes, He will drag me out on the other side and I always find myself back on the right path. (Commercial director, Nigeria, Nigerian financial services local firm)

A key way in which executives' sense of psychological capital is linked to their faith is through prayer. Numerous executives explained the importance of prayer in helping them manage with a sense of self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience.

I prayed to God first because I thought that I could never have done it without that wisdom that comes from above. Because how do you deliver that [cutting costs] without cutting jobs? (Human resource director, Zimbabwe, Zimbabwean agri-business local firm)

I believe that however short a prayer that I give, I believe that He listens. I don't have to be in a room kneeling. I can say it while we are here and something will happen. (Marketing manager, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

Prayer keeps me grounded. It is very easy to imagine... OK, the job comes with so many expectations on you as an individual and the different relationships that you have. For me, I believe that prayer helps me be able to focus. It is a kind of... it gives me confidence to know that whatever I am going to do, I will be able to achieve and then in addition to the confidence it also... I feel I get guided on how I can handle the different relationships that I deal with. (Corporate marketing manager, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

One executive shared the quiet prayer with which he starts each workday. After acknowledging God's presence and power, he would continue:

I thank you for the gifts you have presented me with and commit to using them responsibly and in your honour. Give me a fresh strength to do my job and may my ideas come to energy, so that even my smallest accomplishment it will bring you glory, Lord. (Supply chain manager, Kenya, local retailer)

The prayer concluded with him asking God not to judge him when he became weary but to infuse him with God's spirit, so that he could bring smiles to people at work, and travel safely home.

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^{vii} Luthans, F., Avolio, B. J., Avey, J. B., & Norman, S. M. (2007). Positive psychological capital: Measurement and relationship with performance and satisfaction. *Personnel psychology*, 60(3), 541-572.

Servant leadership through faith



Executives very strongly associate their leadership roles with their faith. Many of them explained that they were selected to serve as leaders because it was God's will, that God had supported them in their efforts to become leaders, and that God was daily guiding their actions as leaders.

God has the ultimate design for everyone's life. I am not the most qualified; I am not the most intelligent. Some of my colleagues here are better than me, some of them may be more academically qualified than me, but I have the responsibility of running this place. (CEO, Nigeria, Financial services local company)

They specifically draw heavily on their faith in *how* they fulfill their leadership obligations. The notion of Jesus as a servant leader is common in the Bible, whereas the Quran explains that each person is a shepherd of the flock in his or her care. The explanations that African executives gave of the way faith shaped their approach to leadership are consistent with the literature on servant leadership.

Servant leadership can be characterised by three elements: The humble and accepting attributes of the leader, how the leader builds others, and the giving of direction. Our interviewees drew on their faith for all three elements.

Previous scholars have emphasised the high power distance between leaders and followers in the African context^{viii}. High power distance implies that followers would accept that some people in a society have – and should have – more power than others. Both leaders and followers would accept strict hierarchies, and questioning leaders is not typically accepted. Our findings suggest that it is important to think about those findings somewhat more critically.

Our interviewees repeatedly explained that their faith guided them to be humble and to actively break down the barriers between the leader and his or her people. Some people used the term “servant leader”; for others, it was implied:

I read a devotion yesterday that says for a Christian humility is not an option; it is a way of life. So you have to be humble and be the servant leader. Humility has really helped me, just helped me to get to where I am today. (Operations Manager, Nigeria, Financial services South African MNC)

We have to remove the notion that as a leader you look down on people. It's the other way round. The people are not looking up to you, they should look down on you because that's the only way we will be able to provide leadership, knowing that you are weak. (Sales manager, Kenya, Agribusiness local company)

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^{viii} E.g. Lituchy, T. R., & Michaud, J. (2017). A Cultural Perspective of Africa. In LEAD: Leadership Effectiveness in Africa and the African Diaspora (pp. 19-31). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

If I want to go to the Scriptures, it says if you humble yourself, He will lift you up. (Marketing Manager, Nigeria, Financial services local company)

Another important part of servant leadership is expressed through a commitment to build others. This commitment to building others was expressed in individual relationships, in relationship with teams, and also more generally, with all the stakeholders of a given leader.

My current leader here, she is my role model, because when I came here, she would just tell me how things had to be done, or to have deadlines for a job I have given somebody, an assignment. So I think she is moulding me. Even with the Bible, she will tell me: 'Read the Bible because God is there for everyone'. (Operations manager, Botswana, Agribusiness local company)

[Prayer] also gives me that comfort that I can be able to impact my team by being kind to them; by making them be better without necessarily having to put them down. (Marketing manager, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

Service is the rent you pay for your room on earth. Now God has blessed me with the ability to give, so I can only give as much of myself as I can every day to my stakeholders. Now who are my stakeholders? It is my shareholders, my customers, the people... suppliers. All of them are stakeholders in our business and I have to engage with all of them every day. (CEO, Botswana, South African agri-business MNC)

Finally, arguably the central task of the leader is to guide. Executives most frequently mentioned how faith informed the value system that they used when guiding others.

I think faith gives you your value system and for me that is very important, the character that you have, the trust you build – it is really anchored on the faith that you have. (CEO, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

Ethics is very big. Doing the right thing is very important for me. I am a Christian, so I feel let us do the right thing, let us be honest, let us be open and be truthful. (Operations manager, Namibia, European retail MNC)

"I read a devotion yesterday that says for a Christian humility is not an option; it is a way of life. So you have to be humble and be the servant leader. Humility has really helped me, just helped me to get to where I am today."

I think, me as a leader... it is even more important to show these [Christian] values as a way of living for people to follow. And the values that we've got in this company and what I've got at home which I am teaching my kids, it is the same stuff. (General Manager, Botswana, South African retail MNC)

For others, strategy execution was directly linked to the expression of their faith:

As a company, we have a culture of believing in God. When we launch a strategy, we call a priest. We are not denominational – a pastor or priest from a church we know – but to bless the strategy and to give us the strength to execute it. (Financial Director, Zimbabwe, Agribusiness MNC)

More work needs to be done to understand how exactly leaders use their faith to guide others. But there can be no doubt how deeply faith is integrated into the leadership actions of many African leaders. The Financial Director of another Zimbabwean agribusiness company put it simply: "You have to do the right thing and see what the outcome is."

Faith as an institution guiding actions

Leaders do not operate in a vacuum. They need to function in an industry and a country where there are certain “rules of the game”. In the African context, the formal institutions are often weak, and corruption and bribery can be rife. Our interviews made it clear that faith played an important role as an informal institution.

Institutions shape societies by providing mechanisms that reward positive and punish undesirable behaviours. Some are formal: Well-functioning courts of law will result in respect for others’ rights, because failure to do so can result in court action. Informal institutions can achieve similar objectives, but often take the form of norms and customs. For example, in South Africa, smoking inside buildings does not happen – but not because of prosecutions. Instead, it is a largely informal norm of how the society operates.

Many executives commented that they were operating in contexts where the institutions were often weak, and where they had to grapple with real ethical dilemmas. In countries with widespread hunger and food scarcity, various firms dealing with perishable foodstuffs had to decide whether to pay bribes to officials to allow



them to access food (e.g. from customs) or to not pay bribes and let food go to waste. Two firms in cash-scarce Zimbabwe had to decide whether to illegally procure materials to keep operations going or to procure only the limited quantities legally allowed, knowing that it would require of them to retrench employees in a country with an estimated unemployment rate of 90% to 95%^{ix}.

For these executives, their faith provide an important anchor.

And you need that anchor because you can often... you need to be flexible here, and because things change and they are fluid. Someone who is living in the UK may have a very clear sense of right and wrong. You know, it can be very split down the middle. Whereas here you can start to sometimes lose sight of [your] sense of right and wrong. (CEO, Zimbabwe, Local agro-processing firm)

I think Christianity is very strong in me. It is one of our biggest values. I struggled with in the beginning when I got here, because I would get border agents coming to me: “Where is my parcel?” Because the franchise would give, would operate completely differently and they would get hampers [as bribes]. And we don’t do that; it is strictly business. (General Manager, Botswana, South African retail MNC)

Various executives explained that faith provide a shared understanding of appropriate behaviour.

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^{ix} <https://africacheck.org/reports/is-zimbabwes-unemployment-rate-4-60-or-95-why-the-data-is-unreliable/>, accessed August 30, 2018

There are commandments of the Bible that say you should not steal, you should be obedient. So my theory is all those people who work under me, they know what they should do and not do. (Store manager, Kenya, Retail local company)

There are certain things you cannot do because of your faith. For instance it says you should not covet another man's property. (Operations Director, Nigeria, South African financial services MNC)

Institutions also function by rewarding desired behaviours, and many executives suggested that faith also provides a framework for positively directing the organization:

[Faith] is aligning people and making sure that they do the right thing. Because we live in a society where taking shortcuts is very tempting. (CEO, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

So I always take up my strategies from a Biblical principle. I always want to develop the complete human being. So having a personal interest, you need to feel for people; you can't be insensitive in environments like this. If you are insensitive, people will take you out. They will steal from you; they will do things that will catch you up in business. (Operations Director, Zimbabwe, South African retailing MNC)

One of the main roles that institutions in a society play is to reduce uncertainty. In countries with strong institutions, people can enter into a contract knowing that it will almost certainly be honoured. Given the weak institutions in many African countries, that certainty does not necessarily exist. For many executives, their faith provides a more powerful source of certainty.

In the Zimbabwean case, many executives spoke about the importance of prayer against the backdrop of an extremely challenging business environment. They spoke not only of how faith gave them the strength to stay focused, but also of how their faith carried them through the uncertainty of the time.

When we went through the worst [when land redistribution resulted in sales dropping to less than 5% of the year before], some junior staff members, prayer warriors, just emerged. Over lunchtime you would hear them singing and praying. We didn't attempt to stop it. [...] There's nothing that we do before we pray. (Managing Director, Zimbabwe, Local agro-processing MNC)

This was evident also in other countries, for example in this example from Kenya:

I remember there are some documents we were actually expecting from government, and I remember the first time when it was really important that we get it. I remember XX asked one of our team members to pray and after that prayer there was to be a meeting. I think there was to be a

"And you need that anchor because you can often... you need to be flexible here, and because things change and they are fluid. Someone who is living in the UK may have a very clear sense of right and wrong. You know, it can be very split down the middle. Whereas here you can start to sometimes lose sight of [your] sense of right and wrong."

board meeting and then there was to be a meeting with the government. And then we received the document. In as much as it was not as detailed as expected, but at least we received it. (Human Resource Director, Kenya, Local retail MNC)

Executives use their faith to guide them not only through the uncertainty caused by government action and inaction, but also to mitigate the normal uncertainties that businesses face.

This company needs prayer. All the help – it needs it. We pray every day in all our stores and before we start meetings we pray. It gives us hope and you literally see the results. (Operations Director, Kenya, Local retail MNC)

This is testimony. There was a time when we were in a tight situation and then there were some midnight prayers going on. At that point, I wasn't really part of it. I was more part of working with the challenge that we had. And that night, I joined actually in the night prayer, and the next day – before 10 am – like magic it [the much-needed payment] happened. (Treasury manager, Nigeria, Local financial services firm)

Researchers focused on emerging economies have found that personal relationships play a critical role as informal institutions when the formal institutions are weak.^x But they have investigated the personal relationships between family or ethnic groups or business people. It seems that in Africa, drawing on a shared faith is another important informal institution.

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Potential for tension around faith in the workplace

Inclusive understanding of God and faith at an abstract level

Religion-specific enactment of a given faith in the workplace

Faith in a multi-religious world

A precondition for an institution to function is that it must be widely shared. If half the people in a country were to drive on the left side of the road, but the other half on the right, it becomes virtually impossible to settle disputes about car crashes. It is only when there is widely shared agreement about the “rules of the game” in a country that institutions can effectively function.

One Zimbabwean firm explained proudly: “We are one of few companies that is not afraid to say it in public. In some companies it is not politically correct to say you are a Christian, but not here.” Where the employees in a company share a faith, then expressing faith is not a problem – and in fact, can be a tremendous source of energy for the firm.

But in many organisations, employees have different faiths. In a multi-religious world, people have very different ways of enacting faith. And although executives repeatedly defined faith in inclusive terms as a “divine being” or “higher power”, when they spoke about specific actions like the need to be honest or committed, they tended to make reference to specific teachings – in the case of most of our interviews, the Bible and Biblical teachings. Thus although executives acknowledge the multiplicity of faiths, they know the specific teachings of only their own religion. This limits their ability to create an inclusive faith environment.

Where faith is a source of individual psychological capital for the executive, and when it serves as a source of values for how that person acts as a leader, the faith of the believer is a largely personal resource. It gives him or her the courage to lead, humility in guiding others, and an anchor when dealing with difficult choices. Some of the executives felt that it was enough for faith to be such a personal resource, and in fact, that it was not appropriate to widely share your beliefs in the workplace. One believer explained:

If you look at spirituality in the workplace... If you are dealing with a multi-cultural diversity and everything you... There are sensitivities that you have to be able to respect and know where to draw a line and know when to do what. You understand I may be a Christian and I may love my God so much, but just because I do doesn't mean that I should bring my team in before we start a meeting and say: 'Let's pray'. Some people may not want that, and I have to be respectful of that. I would rather go back and pray for my team. (Marketing manager, Kenya, European financial services MNC)

Other organisations felt differently. One store manager in Kenya explained that they started and ended each work day with prayer, and even had a short service at the store on Sundays at the end of the workday. There were Muslims working at the store who

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³¹ Richardson, C., & Rammal, H. G. 2018. Religious belief and international business negotiations: Does faith influence negotiator behaviour? *International Business Review*, 27(2), 401-409.

did not attend those prayer sessions, and who were given time off when they needed to go pray. As for people who were not religious at all, the store manager explained:

It is up to them to find their own religion; you cannot do it for them (Store manager, Kenya, Retail local company)

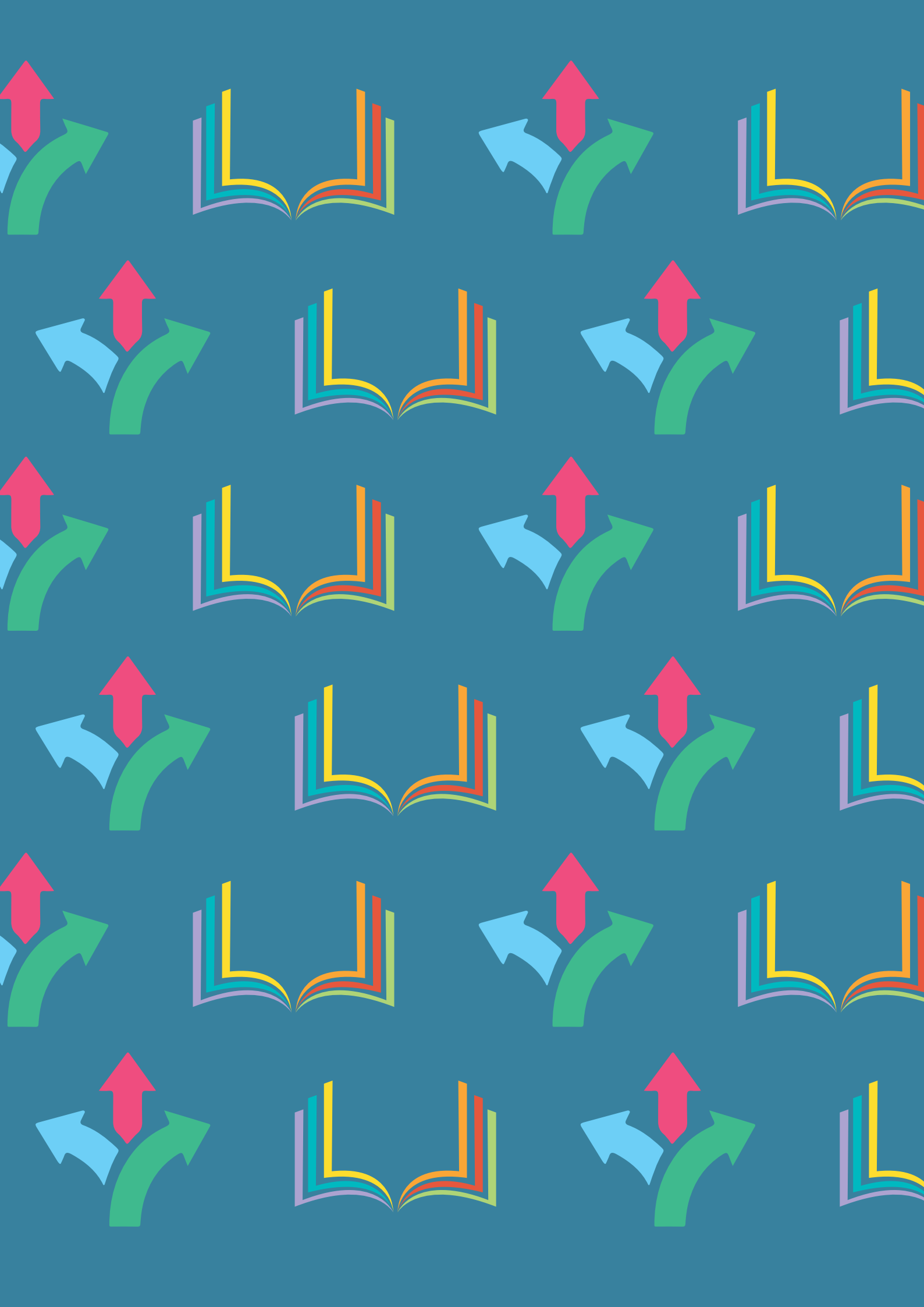
Thus there was acceptance of a diversity of religions and attitudes to religion. But it is not hard to imagine that a work-related conversation can start as people leave the prayer sessions. An employee from a different faith might well feel excluded as he or she, having worked as hard as anyone else on a Sunday, leaves the store while all the other colleagues are gathering for a sermon.

Or maybe not: One of the few academic studies looking at faith^{xi} has found that cross-national negotiations across faiths often benefit when believers are not only visibly devout, but also share the basic tenets of their faith with others. Sharing something as personal as beliefs in a divine being is seen as a strong trust-building act. On the other hand, negotiating with a business leader from a different country is different from working alongside a person day-by-day.

A key characteristic of faith is that it represents a personal choice. Although it is expected that faith will inform actions and resonate beyond a believer's personal life, no organisation has the power or the right to dictate faith. Indeed, much of the power – both constructive and destructive – of faith lies in the tension between an inclusive sense of God, and the religion-specific set of teachings that guide human actions.

Executives are well advised to take note of the enormously powerful role of faith in the workplace in Africa. At the moment, few concrete action steps have been identified for how to harness the power of faith in an inclusive and positive way. But there can be little doubt that faith and how it operates is key in making sense of doing business in Africa.





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