

Leading Organizational Change in the 'New' South Africa

Professor Stella M Nkomo

Department of Human Resource Management

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

Stella.nkomo@up.ac.za

Professor Drikus Kriek

Director: Leadership Development Centre

Associate Professor in HRM and Leadership

Wits Business School

University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg, South Africa

Drikus.Kriek@wits.ac.za

Abstract

This paper reports on a two-pronged qualitative research study that used leaders' life stories and the case research method to understand the leadership of change in fourteen South African organizations. We describe how leaders led the changes required to balance the imperatives emanating from South Africa's socio-political changes and return the country to the international business arena, as well as the challenges created by years of inequality and neglect of the socioeconomic development of the majority of its population. We found that the leaders' life stories played a significant role in how they perceived and responded to the change situation. Four themes summarizing the actions of the leaders – namely, their efforts to embrace change, to provide hope, to connect change to African values and culture, and to champion diversity – are described. The results of the study suggest that leaders' life stories can be an important source of information about how they perceive, interpret, and respond to change.

Leadership theory has increasingly focused on strategic leadership (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001; Flamholtz & Randle, 2008; Ireland & Hitt, 2005; Storey, 2005). Research has demonstrated the critical importance of strategic leadership to performance, long-term sustainability, and innovation (Elenkov, Judge, & Wright, 2005; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Yukl (2010) argues that this shift reflects increased interest in understanding how top management executives transform their companies to respond to highly competitive environments. Studies indicate that strategic leaders have the greatest potential impact on the performance of an organization when the strategy of the organization is no longer aligned with its external environment (Yukl, 2010). Particular focus is placed on how these executives use vision and values to influence the strategic direction of organizations and the commitment of followers during change. Consequently, leading change has been singled out as one of the key dimensions of effective strategic leadership.

In South Africa, the process of transformation that began in 1994 with the historic demise of apartheid placed unprecedented demands upon leaders of organizations in all sectors of society. Firstly, the South African change situation involved a radical restructuring of an entire society and national form of government. Secondly, organizations found themselves suddenly thrust into the external forces shaping the global business landscape (Dess & Pickens, 2000; Hamel, 2002) and having to deal with the demands placed upon their leadership. Thirdly, the end of apartheid resulted in a dramatic change in power relations between races, which sparked significant social identity transformations for all (Booyesen, 2007). Social identity refers to the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of this group membership (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). The system of apartheid shaped the life experiences and identities of black and white leaders in different ways (Booyesen, 2007; Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, Weber, & Ernst, 2009). Thus, with

the end of apartheid, one of the major challenges for all South Africans, including strategic leaders, was adapting and understanding new identities (Mare, 2005).

The purpose of the present study is to understand how South African strategic leaders responded to the changes precipitated by the end of apartheid and how their life stories and identities influenced their approach to leading change during the 1994–2004 watershed decade. The research in this paper addresses the following questions:

- (1) How did the leaders' identities and life stories influence their perceptions of the change situation and their responses?
- (2) How did the leaders lead change in their organizations within the changing South African national context?

Research on what is referred to in the literature as 'change leadership' or 'leading change' typically centers on how to lead change successfully (Woodward & Hendry, 2004; Karp & Tveteraas Helgø, 2009; Hickman, 2010). However, much of what we know about the actual practice of leading change is based on Western experiences and theories developed by studying large-scale change by leaders in primarily European and American organizations (Ghoshal, Gratton & Rogan, 2002; Bartlett & Wozny, 2000; Jick & Peiperl, 2003; Nohria & Beer, 2000). Zoogah (2009) has called for more research on strategic leadership in Africa, given the dearth of knowledge and the fact that many countries in Africa, including South Africa, are experiencing significant changes in their socioeconomic and political contexts.

Theoretical background

Strategic leadership theory evolved from upper echelon theory developed by Hambrick and Mason (1984), which described the instrumental effect of top executives on organizational outcomes. Unlike traditional leadership theory, strategic leadership theory focuses on the

strategic level of the organization and the symbolic and strategic activities of leaders (Vera & Crossan, 2004). It is at this level that meaning and purpose are created for organizations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Since its origins in upper echelon theory, strategic leadership theory has focused mainly on the style and skills that executives use to influence the strategic direction of their organizations (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). For example, emphasis has been placed on the need for strategic leaders to be transformational leaders (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996); practice visionary leadership (Vera & Crossan, 2004); and fulfil functional strategic leadership behaviors (Ireland & Hitt, 2005).

Leading change has also been identified as one of key responsibilities of strategic leaders (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Boal and Hooijberg (2001) identified the capacity to change as one of the major antecedents of strategic leadership. According to a number of scholars, an organization's ability to change requires cognitive and behavioral flexibility among leaders as well as an openness to and acceptance of change (Boal & Whitehead, 1992; Hooijberg, 1996). Leaders' ability to perceive variation in the environment, understand social actors and take the right action at a critical moment is stressed. Curiously, the literature on strategic leadership and leading change has mostly developed in a parallel, rather than integrative fashion. This has occurred despite the fact that some scholars have long distinguished management from leadership by emphasizing the essence of the latter as creating change (Zaleznik, 1977).

The literature on leading change emphasizes the critical role of top executives in leading what is referred to as radical, episodic change or discontinuous change (Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Flamholtz & Randle, 2008). Radical, episodic change is most often triggered by disruptive events in an organization's external environment (Demers, 2007; Plowman, Baker, Beck, Kulkarni, Solansky, & Travis, 2007; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). This is the type of change South African organizations confronted in 1994. Theorists suggest this type of change is more likely to

occur when organizational structures and patterns of behavior have become entrenched (Howard & Coombe, 2006; Street & Gallupe, 2009). This was the case in South Africa on both a national level and an organizational level, since the apartheid system was omnipotent and institutionalized in both government and organizational policies, practices, processes, and structures (Mangaliso & Nkomo, 2001). Consequently, in terms of scope, South African strategic leaders were faced with recreating their organizations with respect to core values, culture, strategy, structures, systems, processes, and people.

While there is an abundant literature on types of change, there is significantly less empirical and theoretical knowledge about how leaders should lead change within different patterns of organizational change (e.g. Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991). The literature that does exist is largely prescriptive. For example, there is a significant body of literature on the steps leaders should use to effectively lead and manage change (e.g. Kotter, 1996; Kotter & Cohen, 2002), and debates on whether or not leaders can actually direct change (e.g. Weick, 2000). In terms of how leaders should approach change, the dominant models all have their origins in the classic work of Lewin (1951), who saw the change leadership process in three phases: unfreeze, change, and refreeze. Leading change models in this mode view change as a planned process in which the leader uses phases or steps to effect change (Van Tonder, 2004).

In contrast, emergent change models view change as an emergent process that can only be successful if leaders focus on how and why change happens, eschewing step models (e.g. Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Lichtenstein, 2000; Weick, 2000; Woodward & Hendry, 2004). These scholars argue that leaders cannot manage change but must rather lead change by creating the context for change to occur (Flamholtz & Randle, 2008; Woodward & Hendry, 2004). For example, based on case studies of nine organizations,

Flamholtz and Randle (2008) found that the key to long-term organizational success was the ability of leaders to adapt to and manage different types of change.

The limited South African literature on leading change is also largely prescriptive (Grobler, 1996; Luthans, Van Wyk, & Walumbwa, 2004; McFarlin, Coster, & Mogale-Pretorius, 1999; Nkomo & Kriek, 2004). This literature points to valuing diversity as a challenge to leading change (Leonardo & Grobler, 2006; McFarlin et al., 1999) and the need for Afro-centric leadership approaches as a response to the changes that have occurred (Mangaliso & Nkomo, 2001). Other research limits the study of transformational change to the way in which organizations in South Africa have responded to employment equity and affirmative action legislation (e.g. Thomas, 2002) or to examining change in a single organization (e.g. Marks, 2000). In one of the few studies that addresses leading change in South Africa, Smit and Carstens (2003) examined the influence of leadership role competencies on employee perceptions of organizational change in three manufacturing companies in South Africa. However, large-scale empirical examinations of the leadership of change during the 1994-2004 watershed period are virtually nonexistent.

In sum, the literature on leading change has largely been prescriptive. Empirical research on how leaders interpret and respond to radical, episodic change (especially national level change) is sparse. Karp and Tveteraas Helgø (2009) have called for more research on leading chaotic change by focusing on human interactions and identity issues. Furthermore, despite pronouncements on the critical importance of a leader's mindset and openness to change in leading change, there is very little empirical research that addresses this aspect (Hunt, 2004; Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). The life stories and histories of change leaders may be one means of understanding how the identities of leaders and their openness to a changing national context have influenced their approach to leading change in their organizations.

Method

Given the paucity of research on the phenomenon of leading change in response to change at the national level in South Africa, an emic approach was necessary to fully understand leading change within the local context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). At the same time, we wanted to develop an in-depth understanding of how the leaders' life stories influenced their perceptions of the change situation and their responses. Thus, the design of the present study was motivated by a need for local grounding and capturing lived meanings of leading change. Both considerations have been identified by Miles and Huberman (1994) as two of the major reasons for using a qualitative research design.

A two-pronged embedded qualitative research design combining life history methodology and case studies was used to enable an integration of the leaders' life stories and the organizational changes implemented. At the individual level we employed a life history approach. According to Musson (2004, p. 34), life history methodology focuses on the ways in which individuals account for and theorize about their actions in the social world over time. Plummer (1983) asserts that the term 'life story' is used interchangeably with the term 'life history'. A major difference between the life story and life history methods, however, is that a life story is an account given by someone about his or her life, while life history is supplemented with other sources such as speeches, biographies, and other documents (Bryman, 2004). Our approach captured the leader's life story and supplemented it with other sources. According to Shamir and Eilam (2005, p. 402), life stories express the storyteller's identities, which are the products of life experiences. Gergen and Gergen (1986, p. 255) emphasize that one's present identity is not a sudden and mysterious event but a sensible result of a life story. According to Kegan (1983, p. 220), life stories provide leaders with a meaning system from which they can interpret reality and act in a way that gives their interpretations of situations and actions a personal meaning. Yet, life

stories cannot be told without constant reference to historical, social or organizational change (Musson, 2004). Dhunpath (2000) argues further that life history methodology is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect close relationships between individual and institutional experiences. Thus, the life history method provides a tool with which to access the sense of reality that individuals have about their own lives and actions, taking into consideration the historical and social context (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

A multiple case study research design was used to collect data at the organizational level (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Huber & Van de Ven, 1995). Case studies were employed as the preferred strategy, because the key research questions are the 'how' and 'why' of change leadership in South Africa. Furthermore, Yin (2003) argues that the case method is appropriate when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. A multiple case study design permits a replication logic in which the cases are treated as a series of independent experiments that confirm or refute emerging conceptual insights (Yin, 2003). Comparing multiple case studies with a single case study also provides opportunities for cross-case comparisons to surface differences and similarities as well as their causes (Stake, 2006). Thus, using the life histories of the leaders and the case studies documenting organizational changes during the ten-year period, we were able to examine how the leaders' identities and life stories influenced their responses to change.

Sample

The sampling approach was theoretical rather than statistical (Eisenhardt, 1991). The researcher's goal is not to represent all possible variations, but to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1991). The basis for the selection of organizations was limited to achieving a diversity of industries, both private and public, and

ensuring that the sample represented South Africa's largest and most prominent organizations, which had experienced significant change (Sabherwal, Hirschheim, & Goles, 2001). Moreover, we wanted organizations led by both blacks and whites to be represented. Organizations were invited to participate by means of a letter explaining the purpose of the study and the time required. Our selection of the final sample was influenced by the inclusion of those companies that agreed to give us access to the top management of the organization as well as the time required to conduct the life history interviews and to collect secondary data. The final sample consisted of fourteen organizations representing a cross-section of industries: five financial services companies, two retail companies, two state-owned enterprises, two manufacturing companies and three service companies. Each organization as well as the change leaders were given pseudonyms to allow candid discussion of the leaders' life stories, their leadership actions, the changes implemented, and challenges faced in leading change.

Data collection

A two-part extensive semi-structured interview protocol was developed to cover key aspects of the leaders' life stories and the organizational changes. The first part of the interview focused on significant life experiences; growing up under apartheid; values, racial and cultural identity; career choices; perceptions of the national changes occurring in South Africa; and ideas and lessons about leading change. The second part focused on the pre-1994 organization, the triggers of change, the how and why of the change interventions, the perceived drivers of change, the leaders' perceptions of their role and/or their responsibility for change, and the actions they undertook to lead the changes in their organizations. We interviewed the leaders instrumental in the change processes in the fourteen organizations. This usually involved the CEO/Managing Director and other senior executives that were in executive positions during the 1994–2004

period. An average of four executives was interviewed in each organization resulting in a total of sixty-four interviews across the fourteen organizations. As the data collection unfolded, our efforts focused on the key change leader in each organization. The interviews averaged two to three hours each and were sometimes conducted over more than one session. With the consent of the leaders, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Consistent with the life history approach (Bryman, 2004), information gleaned from the interviews about the change interventions was supplemented with data from archival material, media reports (especially public interviews with the leaders), their speeches, and company communications. The goal was to capture from multiple data sources how they led change, change interventions, and change initiatives. Such an approach is essential for the validity and reliability of case study research (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2009).

Data Analysis

Unlike statistical analyses of questionnaire data, there are few mathematical formulas or 'recipes' to guide the analysis of qualitative data (Pratt, 2009). However, the ultimate goal is to treat the data fairly, to establish trustworthiness, to produce compelling analytic conclusions, and to rule out alternate interpretations (Yin, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Content analysis of the interviews was performed to extract key themes in the leaders' life stories, particularly emotive stories about transformations in personal identity, how they perceived change, their roles and responsibilities in leading change, and the change interventions (Weber, 1990). We also analyzed secondary documents (for example, speeches, annual reports, and archival material) to supplement and verify information gleaned from the interviews. For each organization, a case study was prepared by the authors, with the assistance of research assistants, using the interviews

and secondary documents. Key aspects of the leaders' life stories were interwoven into the case narrative.

Once we had completed all the narrative case write-ups, a within-in case analysis was performed (Eisenhardt, 1989).. Each researcher independently read the cases to categorize the types of changes that had occurred, the themes associated with the leaders' life histories, and their approach to leading change. We looked for linkages between their life experiences and their perceptions of the change situation as well as how they articulated their actions. We created lists and summaries of what was emerging. Further analysis was performed using Eisenhardt's (1989) cross-case analysis approach, in which we focused on areas of convergence and divergence across the cases. This was an iterative process, and with each iteration, we used new permutations of case pairs to gain clarity on conceptual insights (Eisenhardt, 1989).

This multiple analytical strategy formed the basis for an attempt to theorize about how the leaders led change. We thus used the information on the interventions to examine potential reasons for the interventions, any connections between the leaders' key life experiences during apartheid and the new national dispensation, and their own perceptions of their leadership approach to change. The results are reported in the next section. Firstly, we foreground the stories of two leaders in an excerpted narrative form to exemplify what we generally found among the larger sample. Thereafter, we summarize the change leadership themes that emerged from the cases.

Results

There were similarities in the ways in which the leaders led the change efforts in their organizations. We selected two leaders to demonstrate the interconnections between their life stories and how change unfolded in their organizations.

Case Narrative: JH Oosthuizen and IO Holdings, Pty.

Oosthuizen grew up in a small town in the Free State, South Africa. The Free State was often viewed as a traditionally Afrikaner stronghold during the days of apartheid. Some would therefore have expected Oosthuizen to have been deeply infused with an attitude and mindset that embraced apartheid and its practices, yet that was not the case. His father was a teacher, and Oosthuizen was raised in a traditional Dutch Reformed Church environment, or what he referred to as “the salt of the earth with high moral values”. Family and community were cherished. His parents were very strict and set high standards. Oosthuizen described the impact of his early years: “Growing up where we did, we were somewhat isolated. In our staunch Dutch Reformed Church community, we were taught about the threat of communism. I don’t think it was a racial thing in our community but more of a protection of the Afrikaner culture. At the same time, my mother made us aware of the unfairness of the apartheid system and its lack of human dignity.” Like many white South Africans of his time, Oosthuizen’s family did not directly challenge the system. By the time he became a young man, Oosthuizen came to his own realization about apartheid: “As I got older, I become more aware of what was going on, and I developed an enormous amount of empathy and compassion for black South Africans. When I was in my early twenties, I said to myself, ‘This is wrong’, and I can say with sincerity that I tried to play a positive role to effect transformation of South Africa. I worked very closely with a number of progressive Afrikaners. As I learnt more about apartheid, the more I denounced it, and today the role I play is to ensure that I use every opportunity to also make a difference from that point of view and through our company social investment initiatives.”

Oosthuizen knew early that he wanted a career in business and earned his undergraduate degree and MBA at the local university. Following a number of management positions in research, planning, sales, and marketing, he went on to head the marketing function for a large

retail company. His talent and success in that position resulted in his being appointed CEO of one of the largest retail holding companies in South Africa in 1995. Oosthuizen took over the company, as he recalls, at a time of tremendous change in the country. He found a company in debt, burdened by non-core business acquisitions and the pressing need to re-invent itself in response to the political changes that had happened in 1994.

Oosthuizen took several actions when he entered the position. He stated: "We developed our shared values; we redefined our vision; we revisited our mission statement; and we looked at all our HR [human resource] policies with a view to eradicating discrimination." He quickly made the decision to disinvest from non-core retail businesses to get the organization back to solvency. Under his guidance, the company put in place aggressive employment equity and black empowerment initiatives to increase black representation in management. The success of these initiatives earned him an award from the Black Management Forum. However, he admits that not everyone in the organization readily accepted his efforts to transform the face of management: "Many of the white managers felt threatened, and I did everything I could to mitigate these reactions. However, I believed black people needed to be given a chance, even if they lacked some of the necessary skills. The white man had to change. If you can't persuade them, then people have to say, 'Well that is not the environment I want to work in.' We did lose a lot of good people, but also many stayed."

Oosthuizen's approach to change was based on the simple idea that the company had to be aligned with the demands of the macro-level changes in South Africa. For him, the 'people' aspect of change was the most critical. He believed that the company needed to "optimize its commitment to people by making sure everyone felt valued and respected". Oosthuizen embraced the change challenge precipitated by the end of apartheid and spoke about his identity: "I see myself as an African. I am very patriotic, and I believe we are here for a purpose, and I accept co-

responsibility for the future of the country. I also know that I am partially responsible for creating the legacy we have to deal with day-to-day. So I regarded it as a privilege to be part and parcel of this period of reconciliation and change.” Oosthuizen’s change leadership approach was informal and participative. He relied a great deal on persuasion and influence through example. He put it this way: “I saw my leadership responsibility quite simply. I had to give direction, engender trust and in particular I had to give hope because we had been going through a tough time. We had almost lost hope that it would come right because we were technically insolvent.” Oosthuizen believed strongly in the power of the human spirit and never had any doubt that by showing interest in and caring for his staff, they would achieve. Thus, his staunch belief in values and a sense of justice garnered through his upbringing on the plains of the Free State played a significant role in the manner in which he approached the change efforts in his organization.

Case Narrative: A. Ngwenya and Industrial Organization

Ngwenya grew up in a rural village in the North West Province of South Africa, where he spent his early years as a herd boy responsible for the family’s cattle. Ngwenya’s father and grandfather were preachers who instilled in him an appreciation for other people, industriousness, discipline, and the value of hard work. These values helped him withstand the degradation of apartheid: “It was very, very tough growing up and living under the apartheid era. It was a life of humiliation. The most painful of all was being given fourth rate education called ‘Bantu education’. This education was meant to keep you perpetually a servant.” Two of the values that never left Ngwenya were *ubuntu*, which literally means that a human being finds true expression in the context of other human beings; and *intsebenzo*, which requires a young man to produce evidence that he is able to take care of himself before he can marry and raise a family. The values he learned in his community remained with Ngwenya. He excelled at school and demonstrated

leadership attributes early when he was elected head prefect of his high school. Armed with an undergraduate degree in psychology, Ngwenya was touted to teach at his alma mater, a designated black university. After being fired because he insisted on “speaking his mind and was very vocal about the inhumanity of apartheid”, Ngwenya became a management trainee at one of the few companies in the country that was appointing blacks into management. He also completed a number of advanced management programmes outside South Africa.

This marked the beginning of an illustrious business career. Ngwenya became the first black director and chairman of Industrial. Ngwenya described the change challenge: “I had to normalize what had happened in the past. My goal was to have the previously excluded, included and to have the potential that was not developed, developed.” His impact was felt at the first board meeting he chaired. Ngwenya was determined to make the organization African and inclusive and told the board: “ I want to make our company a truly African one, for Africans of all descriptions – white, black, Asian, coloured,¹ whatever – but true Africans who owe their allegiance to the continent in the first place. We need to have a tapestry in place – that intricate mosaic that forms a business matrix in a manner that does not destroy but builds.”

Ngwenya embarked on a three-pronged change strategy. Firstly, he undertook an aggressive intervention to recruit and develop black management and technical talent. The organization partnered with an international university to send these new staff to attain further qualifications in management and engineering. A programme that focused on the development of women was also successful in diversifying the gender representation in management and technical positions. Secondly, Ngwenya worked on developing an African leadership model based on *ubuntu*. Once the model had been developed, it was incorporated into the leadership development training programmes of the organization. *Ubuntu* also became a key pillar in its business strategy of expanding within Africa. Ngwenya’s approach to leading change stressed

collectivism and team work. He summed up this philosophy by saying: “You can shine as a member of a team, but you can only shine within the context of the team.” Throughout the change process, Ngwenya’s speeches and conversations with staff were opportunities to expand upon the *ubuntu* philosophy. One of the cultural expressions used to illustrate the meaning of *ubuntu* is translated as: “One finger cannot pick up a grain.” He would explain to staff: “A grain is a very small thing, and if one is individualistic and selfish, you will battle to pick up the grain. But we can pick up a grain as a collective.”

Thirdly, he emphasized excellence in all that the company did. He benchmarked the company against similar firms globally. Performance standards were set that reflected these benchmarks. According to Ngwenya: “The pursuit of excellence is never allowing yourself to operate at a level where you elevate mediocrity as though it was a virtual state; instead the focus is on optimal performance.” Finally, he changed the vision of the organization from a local one to “becoming a pre-eminent African organization with global stature”. In order to achieve this vision, he established a business unit that focused on internationalizing the business. He explained the rationale for the vision: “Globalization is a huge force sweeping the entire world. The big international players would love to establish themselves in Africa, which has huge potential for development. The competition is knocking on our door. It is no longer theoretical. If we ignore that trend and fail to prepare for it, we will be swallowed up by the great multinational corporations. While we keep our roots in this part of Africa, our gaze must cover the continent.”

Under Ngwenya’s leadership, Industrial grew to establish a footprint in 31 countries on the continent and received a global award in its industry in 2001. Ngwenya summed up his change leadership approach: “I worked from the idea of a compassionate organization in a compassionate society – the one the new government wanted to create. I thought of Industrial as a humane organization, one that understood the bottom line was important, but that people were

even more so. In achieving the bottom line, I actually tried to make people feel very good about working for Industrial, because we really cared about them. In leading change, values are a lot more important than arguments or attitudes; they are so fundamental. My values actually drove the changes I tried to make, and they drive what I do in life as well.”

Summary of Change Leadership Themes

In sum, we found four change leadership themes in the case narratives.

Embracing change.

Across the cases, the leaders embraced rather than resisted the changes confronting their organizations. They demonstrated personal acceptance of the changes occurring. The leaders perceived the forces of globalization driving change as well as the need for change created by the new dispensation. Instead of resisting, the leaders in the study accepted the need to align the organization with the demands imposed by its external environment. They were willing to explore new opportunities, to maintain and expand stakeholder relationships, and to cultivate partnerships. A multiple stakeholder perspective was adopted by a majority of the organizations in the sample, along with recognizing the need to extend beyond the ‘bottom-line’ by addressing their corporate social responsibilities. In this regard, embracing change required leaders to transcend their own immediate systems and network these external relationships. Within their organizations, leaders had to empower their employees to be innovative and creative. The change leadership efforts of the leaders in the sample were thus characterized by the importance of embracing change internally while taking into account the external environment of change.

Providing hope.

Despite the exuberance that accompanied the end of apartheid, there remained considerable anxiety about the transformation to a democratic society and people's places in the new society. To lead change successfully, leaders had to provide hope that organizational transformation would succeed, despite their own uncertainty of what that future entailed. Change leadership involved helping employees envision an attractive future, not only for the organization but also for themselves. Often the new organizational vision statements captured this duality. For example, one organization expressed its vision as "being contributors to the creation of a prosperous and better South Africa". In their communications with employees, leaders stressed the impossibility of separating what was happening outside the organization from what needed to change internally. The leaders were able to use their authority and influence to re-frame issues and to provide a supportive and empathetic climate in which to create hope. Our finding is consistent with the assertion of Luthans et al. (2004) that South African leaders needed to take a positive approach and become hopeful organizational leaders.

Connecting change to African values and culture.

Another aspect of their change leadership was a greater awareness of the African context within which their organizations operate. Leaders took deliberate action to connect with and leverage African values in the change process. Two aspects to the change processes in particular epitomized this 'African' approach, namely, the use of narratives closely related to the local context and a different focus on interpersonal interaction. Examples of the former include one company's adoption of the metaphor of wild dogs to symbolize the new culture they were creating; while others gave their change projects African names such as the *Siyanqoba* strategy.

Others like Ngwenya were explicit in their desire to create an 'African' company based on values learned during childhood. This theme reflected the effort to instil *ubuntu* into the organizational culture and leadership. *Ubuntu* is a philosophical belief that, "I am because we are", which is rooted in Africa's largely collectivist culture (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Mangaliso, 2001). This interdependence between people "can be defined as humaneness – a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness" (Mangaliso, 2001, p. 24). *Ubuntu* was identified as a means of distinguishing the unique leadership challenges and needs of the African continent from the traditional Eurocentric approaches that had dominated in the apartheid era.

Championing diversity.

Apartheid left deep faultlines among South Africa's diverse racial groups. The early life of each of the leaders was shaped by apartheid and its policy of racial separation. We found micro and macro dimensions in the leaders' efforts to change race relations in their organizations. At the micro or personal level, leaders reflected upon their racial identities and how these affected their values and behaviours. As champions of diversity, the leaders in the study initiated diversity training interventions intended to create dialogue across racial lines. Many personally participated in these interventions. At the macro level, almost all the organizations embarked on employment equity initiatives and other efforts to address the need to erase the fissures between black and white employees rooted in apartheid. For example, an employment equity initiative used in many of the organizations was the placement of young black managers in developmental positions or as understudies for key middle and senior positions. Table 1 provides a summary of these four themes and examples of leaders' actions.

Discussion

This study is one of the first to systematically identify how South African strategic leaders perceived and responded to the national changes that occurred in the country during the watershed 1994–2004 period. We found that their life stories provided a window into their identities, values, and beliefs, which in turn provided insight into how they perceived the change situation and how they went about changing their organizations. The four change leadership themes align with central elements of the leaders' life experiences. Shamir and Eilam (2005) argue that a leader's unique leadership style is derived from the meaning the leader attaches to the life experiences that he or she has enjoyed. The leaders in our study reflected upon their social identities in terms of how they experienced apartheid and the transformations in their thinking during the course of their lives. Leaders, both black and white, came to realizations about the realities of apartheid and its effects on their lives, albeit in different ways. These realizations seem to have been important in the way in which they subsequently embraced and accepted the need to transform their organizations to align with the political and social imperatives driven by the South African government.

This is not to say that they were not also cognizant of the need for their organizations to become globally competitive. The change leadership behaviours they enacted were multiple and complex in terms of aligning the business with the government's social and economic imperatives and the realization that the issues extended beyond the simple choice between people and profits. As one leader succinctly stated: "It is difficult to transform and perform at the same time. So one has to realize it may have some impact on the business, but only over the short time, because business cannot exist in isolation to the external context."

In some respects, the actions that leaders took are consistent with what has been reported in other studies of leading change. The approaches described by the leaders suggest that leading

change requires a focus on both hard systems and soft system changes, which is thus consistent with theories propounding the value of both these approaches in leading change (Nohria & Beer, 2000). The leaders' accounts also provide insight into how radical national change influences the leadership of change in organizations (Howard & Coombe, 2006). All the leaders articulated and conveyed a vision for the changes they wanted to institute in their organizations, but also implemented changes in systems. The research validates the claim that discontinuous change is often achieved through emergent strategies rather than a single fixed plan. In all the case studies, the changes took place incrementally over a number of years. We do not wish to create the impression that their leadership of change was smooth and unilaterally successful. In many of the cases, there were setbacks, and not all the change initiatives attained ideal goals. Many leaders encountered considerable resistance from middle and lower management, particularly with respect to staff transformation initiatives. What is clear, however, is that the organizations had become fundamentally different from what they were in 1994.

The methodology used in the study went beyond the dominant approaches to studying the leadership of change. Scholars have for the most part focused on developing what Van Tonder (2004) has labelled "n-step linear models for leading change or linking leadership styles to change". The contribution of the life story approach is its revelation of leaders' identities, values and beliefs, and consequently how these justify their leadership of change. In other words, it can illuminate the manner in which leaders come to hold particular beliefs and versions of reality as well as their motivations for the ways in which they lead change. Moreover, one of the often-repeated tenets in relation to strategic leadership is the critical importance of a leader's mindset and openness to change for successful change in organizations.

No study of this nature is without its limitations. Life stories are retrospective in nature, which calls into question the extent to which the participants' accounts are accurate reflections of

what they did and how they did it. To some extent, we mitigated this limitation by using additional secondary sources including speeches and media articles which allowed us to build life histories (Musson, 2004). It should be underscored that the choice of combining life histories with the case research method was deliberate. We did not specifically assess the effects of the changes on staff within each organization, although the perceptions of key management informants were also part of the data-collection process. Future studies of change leadership using a life history approach could be expanded by examining how the knowledge of a leader's life story influences the recipients of change. While the data suggest that the leaders' life experiences provide information on how they perceived and led change, we cannot rule out the influence on the attitudes and actions of the leaders of the broader effort towards reconciliation within the country. Further research is needed to validate the findings of this study. Finally, due to the interpretative nature of life history methodology, Musson (2004) admonishes researchers to be aware of their own subjectivity in bringing implicit and explicit preconceptions to the analysis. Despite our best efforts to accurately represent the main themes that appeared in the life stories and the case narratives, we cannot entirely rule out the influence of our own views (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005).

Conclusion

As the goal of this special issue is to advance the science of leadership and management in the African context, we believe that life stories gleaned through life history methodology is particularly relevant to studying leadership and change in Africa for two main reasons. Firstly, many countries in Africa have grappled with significant political and socioeconomic, national-level, discontinuous change, and continue to do so (Zoogah, 2009). There are many who argue that effective leadership is critical in resolving the challenges associated with the

underdevelopment of the continent. However, most of the extant literature on leadership and leading change is based on research performed primarily on leaders in Western organizations. Rarely, if at all, were leaders in these organizations faced with the fundamental restructuring of a nation at multiple levels (namely, political, economic, and social). Secondly, as Jackson (2004) has observed, colonialism in Africa had a profound impact not only on the political, economic, and social trajectory of the continent, but it also had defining effects on the life experiences, identities, and mindsets of its people. It is thus imperative that research on leadership in Africa should pay attention to the life histories of leaders in order to highlight the unique dynamic offered by the social context, the impact on the individual concerned, and the way in which this manifests in the leadership of change.

Life history methodology allows for understanding life stories within their historical and cultural context. Examining leaders' life experiences can assist in understanding the unique historical and cultural contexts in which the leaders have been shaped, as well as their motivations and their perceptions of their leadership situations. It is important to note that this study captures the latter in terms of the unique national context of South Africa. More research using a life history approach should be conducted in other countries in Africa, especially in light of the fact that scholars have illustrated differences in colonialism and its practices in different countries (Young, 2001). Finally, leaders' life stories could also be used to access authentic cultural meanings of leadership in Africa. This could potentially make a significant contribution, given the critiques of the current approaches to cross-cultural leadership research (Ailon, 2008).

References

- Ailon, G. (2008). Mirror, mirror on the wall: Culture's consequences in a value test of its own design. *Academy of Management Review*, 33, 885–904.
- Bartlett, C. A. & Wozny, M. (2000). *GE's two-decade transformation: Jack Welch's leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.
- Boal, K. B. & Hooijberg, R. (2001). Strategic leadership: Moving on. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11, 515–550.
- Boal, K. B. & Whitehead, C. J. (1992). A critique and extension of stratified systems perspective. In R. L. Phillips & J. G. Hunt (Eds.), *Strategic leadership: A multiorganizational-level perspective* (pp. 237–255). Westport, CT: Quorum.
- Booyesen, L. (2007). Societal power shifts and changing identities in South Africa: Workplace implications. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 10, 1–17.
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Research methods*. (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chrobot-Mason, D., Ruderman, M. N., Weber, T. J., & Ernst, C. (2009). The challenge of leading on unstable ground: Triggers that activate social identity faultlines. *Human Relations*, 62, 1763–1794.
- Cooperrider, D. L. & Srivastava, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. Woodman & W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Part 1). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Demers, C. (2007). *Organizational change theories: A synthesis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dess, G. & Pickens, J. (2000). Changing roles: Leadership in the 21st century. *Organizational Dynamics*, Winter, 18–33.
- Dunphy, D. & Stace, D. (1993). The strategic management of corporate change. *Human Relations*, 46, 905–920.
- Dhunpath, R. (2000). Life history methodology: 'Narradigm' regained. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13, 543–551.
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 532–550.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1991). Better stories and better constructs: The case for rigor and comparative logic. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 620–627.
- Elenkov, D. S., Judge, W., & Wright, P. (2005). Strategic leadership and executive innovation influence: An international multi-cluster comparative study. *Strategic Management Journal*, 26, 665–682.
- Ekvall, G. & Arvonen, J. (1991). Change-centred leadership: An extension of the two-dimensional model. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 7, 17–26.
- Flamholtz, E. & Randle, Y. (2008). *Leading strategic change: Bridging theory and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Freedman, J. & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: the social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gergen, K. J. & Gergen, M. M. (1986). Narrative form and the construction of psychological science. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.

- Ghoshal, S., Gratton, L., & Rogan, M. (2002). *The transformation of BP*. London: London Business School.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Grobler, P. A. (1996). Leadership challenges facing companies in South Africa. In P. A. Grobler, S. Warnich, M. R. Carrell, N. F. Elbert, & R. D. Hatfield (Eds.), *Human resource management in South Africa*. Great Britain: Thompson Learning.
- Hambrick, D. C. & Mason, P. A. (1984). Upper echelons: The organizations as a reflection of its top managers. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, 193–206.
- Hamel, G. (2002). *Leading the revolution*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hickman, G. R. (2010). *Leading change in multiple contexts: Concepts and practices in organizations, community, political, social and global change settings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Higgs, M. & Rowland, D. (2005). All changes great and small: Exploring approaches to change and its leadership. *Journal of Change Management*, 5, 121–151.
- Hooijberg, R. (1996). A multidirectional approach toward leadership: An extension of the concept of behavioral complexity. *Human Relations*, 49(7), 917–946.
- House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P., & Gupta, V. (Eds.). (2004). *Leadership, culture, and organizations: The Globe study of 62 societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Howard, A. & Coombe, D. (2006). National level change: a story of two countries. *Journal of Management Development*, 25, 732–742.
- Huber, G. & Van de Ven, A. H. (Eds.). (1995). *Longitudinal field research methods: Studying processes of change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

- Hunt, J. G. (2004). What is leadership? In J. Antonakis, A. G. Cianciolo, & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The nature of leadership* (pp. 19-47). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ireland, R. D. & Hitt, M. A. (2005). Achieving and maintaining strategic competitiveness in the 21st century: The role of strategic leadership. *Academy of Management Executive*, 19, 63–77.
- Jackson, T. (2004). *Management and change in Africa: A cross-cultural perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Jick, T. & Peiperl, M. A. (2003). *Managing change: Cases and concepts*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Karp, T. & Tveteraas Helgø, T. I. (2009). Reality revisited: leading people in chaotic change. *Journal of Management Development*, 28, 81–93.
- Kegan, R. (1983). *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kotter, J. & Cohen, D. (2002). *The heart of change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Leonardo, A. & Grobler, A. F. (2006). Exploring challenges to transformational leadership communication about employment equity: Managing organizational change in South Africa. *Journal of Communication Management*, 10, 290–306.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lichtenstein, B. B. (2000). Self-organized transitions: A pattern amid the chaos of transformative change. *Academy of Management Executive*, 14, 128–141.
- Lowe, K. B., Kroeck, K. G., & Sivasubramaniam, N. (1996). Effectiveness correlates of transformational and transactional leadership: A meta-analytic review of the MLQ literature. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 7, 385–425.

- Luthans, F., Van Wyk, R., & Walumbwa, R. (2004). Recognition and development: Hope for South African organizational leaders. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 25, 512–527.
- Mangaliso, M. P. (2001). Building competitive advantage from Ubuntu: Management lessons from South Africa. *Academy of Management Executive*, 15, 23–35.
- Mangaliso, M. & Nkomo, S. M. (2001). ESKOM's chairman Reuel Khoza on the transformation of South African business. *Academy of Management Executive*, 15, 8–15.
- Mare, G. (2005). Race, nation, democracy: Questioning patriotism in the new South Africa, *Social Research*, 72, 501–532.
- Marks, M. (2000). Transforming robocops? A case study of police organizational transformation. *Society in Transition*, 31, 144–162.
- McFarlin, S., Coster, E., & Mogale-Pretorius, T. (1999). South African management development in the 21st century: Moving towards an Africanized model. *Journal of Management Development*, 18, 63–77.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA.: Sage Publications,
- Musson, G. (2004). Life histories. In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide*. London: Sage Publications.
- Nkomo, S. M. & Kriek, H. S. (2004). Leading transformational change: challenges and opportunities. In T. Meyer & I. Boninelli (Eds.). *Conversations in leadership: A South African perspective*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Nohria, N. & Beer, M. (2000). *Cracking the code of change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

- Plowman, D. A., Baker, L. T., Beck, T. E., Kulkarni, M., Solansky, S. T., & Travis, D.V. (2007). Radical change accidentally: The emergence and amplification of small change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50, 515–543.
- Plummer, K. (1983). *Documents of life: An introduction to the problems and literature of a humanistic method*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Pratt, M. (2009). For the lack of a boilerplate: Tips on writing up (and reviewing) qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53, 856–862.
- Romanelli, E. & Tushman, M. L. (1994). Organizational transformation as punctuated equilibrium: An empirical test. *Academy of Management Journal*, 37, 1141–1166.
- Sabherwal, R., Hirschheim, R., & Goles, T. (2001). The dynamics of alignment: Insights from a punctuated equilibrium model. *Organization Science*, 12, 179–197.
- Shamir, B. & Eilam, G. (2005). What's your story? A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 395–417.
- Shamir, B., Dayan-Horesh, H., & Adler, D. (2005). Leading by biography: Towards a life-story approach to the study of leadership. *Leadership*, 1, 13–29.
- Smit, H. & Carstens, L. (2003). The influence of leadership role competencies on organization change outcome in the manufacturing industry in South Africa. *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1, 45–52.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Storey, J. (2005). What next for strategic-level leadership research. *Leadership*, 1, 89–104.
- Street, C. T. & Gallupe, B. R. (2009). A proposal for operationalizing the pace and scope of organizational change in management studies. *Organizational Research Methods*, 12, 720–737.

- Tajfel, H. (1972). Social categorization (English version of La categorisation sociale). In S. Moscovici (Ed.), *Introduction a la psychologie sociale*, Vol. I. Paris: Larousse.
- Thomas, A. (2002). Employment equity in South Africa: Lessons from the global school. *International Journal of Manpower*, 23, 237–255.
- Van Tonder, C. L. (2004). *Organisational change: theory and practice*. Johannesburg: Van Schaik.
- Vera, D. & Crossan, M. (2004). Strategic leadership and organizational learning. *Academy of Management Review*, 29, 222–240.
- Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E. (2000). Emergent change as universal in organizations. In M. Beer & N. Nohria (Eds.), *Breaking the code of change* (pp. 223-41). Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Woodward, S. & Hendry, C. (2004). Leading and coping with change. *Journal of Change Management*, 4, 155–183.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Young, R. C. (2001). *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*. London: Blackwell.
- Yukl, G. (2010). *Leadership in organizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Zaleznik, A. (1977). Managers and leaders: are they different? *Harvard Business Review*, 55, 67–78.
- Zoogah, D. B. (2009). Cultural value orientation, personality, and motivational determinants of strategic leadership in Africa. *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 4, 202–222.

¹ Refers to people belonging to a population group made up of persons of mixed racial descent or of certain other nonwhite descent, particularly as distinguished during apartheid from blacks, Asians and whites.

Table I. Evidence of change leadership themes

Change leadership themes	Sources	Actions	Exemplary interview quotes and initiatives
Embracing change	Leader interviews, internal company documents, media reports, speeches, management staff interviews	Confronting dual challenges of change situation Shifting own assumptions Crafting new visions	Quotes: 'We had to be partners in South Africa's prosperity'. 'I knew we had to change our brand from the Afrikaner company to a company for all South Africans'. 'Human beings are by nature selective information gatherers, which leads to an ineffective reality processing mechanism. Therefore, I realized the truth as I may have come to believe it, may not necessarily be the real truth'. Initiatives: Enroute to 2005 Strategy; International Benchmarking; Community Investment Projects; Siyanqoba Strategy (isiZulu for we are conquering).
Providing hope	Leader interviews, leaders' speeches, media reports Management staff interviews	Envisioning an attractive future Demonstrating adaptability Balancing perspectives of multiple stakeholders	Quotes: 'The challenge now is to improve on what we have achieved but I am confident that we have the talent and skill to achieve that goal'. 'I did road shows where in essence every staff member had an opportunity to speak frankly. I believed every primary stakeholder had to be happy or at least buy-in'. 'Even though he is a strong initiator and had a strong idea of where he was going, he would rather spend two years taking a decision to make sure that everyone has time to comment, talk about it, argue about it'. 'We do indeed have all those essential elements in place, new procedures and processes, training and development, performance evaluations, change and diversity management—but it is not these which have been key to our success—rather it has been our shared vision'. Initiatives: Company road shows, strategic planning sessions; engagement with clients and unions.
Connecting change to African values and culture	Leader interviews, internal company documents	Stressing collective action and teamwork Using 'African' themes in naming change initiatives	Quotes: 'I held a lot of Indabas, and Lekgotlas and Bosberaads ^a as a way of engaging with staff'. 'YYY is like a pack of wild dogs'. 'Together we are stronger than if we stand alone'. 'I set up a

Continued

Table I. (Continued)

Change leadership themes	Sources	Actions	Exemplary interview quotes and initiatives
Championing diversity	Content of culture change programmes, Leaders' speeches	Evoking 'African' themes in communication with staff Reflecting 'African' values in new values	programme that all senior executives had to work at least 3 days a year on the shop floor. I learnt a lot talking to people and understanding their transport difficulties and especially important values in their culture'. 'XXY is made up of our people and not us'. Initiatives: Development Programme to develop African leadership; emphasizing collective values and principles in values statements; using African names for change interventions; culture change programmes.
	Leader interviews, internal company documents Media reports, external awards	Reflecting on personal identity Accepting the paradoxes Transforming the racial makeup of the workforce Providing leadership for valuing diversity	Quotes: 'For transformation to be successful, I had to support it from the top'. 'The white man had to change! If you can't persuade them, then people either got to say well that is not the environment I want to work in'. 'Being a white male you had to believe in yourself and not feel threatened by the empowerment drive but yet you may say you know your time has come—it's quite a risky environment'. 'Without our diverse staff we would be an organization that is doomed to fail'. Initiatives: Accelerated development for black managers; diversity training interventions; changing composition of own management team; restyling company offices and other artefacts to reflect diversity of cultures.

^aAll of these refer to consultative sessions. Indaba is an isiZulu word meaning a 'get-together or gathering of elders with the people to discuss important matters, pass down folklore and hold court'. Lekgotla is Sesotho for 'meeting circle to discuss important matters'. Bosberaad is an Afrikaans word meaning a 'bush summit' or strategic planning session.