

The challenge to effective leadership development in Africa

The approach to leadership development in Africa needs to change. The prevailing orthodoxy is falling short. Current methods are not delivering the deep leadership skills base that organisations in the region so urgently need.

Globally more than \$14bn was spent on leadership development between 2010 -14..... **and yet** only 1 in 3 leaders state that they value the development they received.

5 considerations bring this leadership challenge into sharp focus;

- Organisations with high quality leaders are 13 times more likely to outperform competitors on key metrics
- Venture capitalists say that the quality of the executive team is one of the 3 most important factors in a growing business being successful
- Analysts' view of the top team can make up to 35% difference to share price
- Research shows "home grown" are more effective than imported leaders
- Only 18% of HR specialists feel their companies have the quality/quantity of leaders needed to run the firm in 3 to 5 years

Global best practice in leadership development concludes that the most effective leadership development:

- Is focused on those considered as 'talent'
- Is based on current and future real challenges
- Connects leadership development with the growth and development of the organisation
- Develops EQ and behaviours, not just intellect and knowledge.
- Uses syndicate and team learning, to give the context of relationships, i.e. learning more from each other, rather than through "experts"
- People arrive with (and learn through delivering on) an organisational challenge, not just their own learning agenda.

Yet leadership development initiatives continue to disappoint, their impact and value for money regularly falling short, especially in fast-growing African economies.

So how do organisations grow their leadership talent and build the effective leadership teams they need in a complex, fast-changing world?

We share a view expressed by Peter Hawkins and other members of the IDM Advisory Group. A big part of the failure of current leadership development initiatives has been the consensus that leadership lies in individuals, and so to develop leadership all you have to do is develop individual skills.

But this belief - seductive to HR leaders under pressure to develop and retain individual talent - fails to recognise three important issues:

- That leadership is fundamentally relational and is only present when there are leader(s), followers and a shared endeavour – unless all three are present leadership ceases.
- That the major challenges facing organisations, countries and the world, do not lie in individuals, teams, or functions that can be led in traditional ways, but in the relationship between individuals, teams, functions, organisations, countries etc. These challenges are embedded in relationships.
- That the level of complexity, interdependency and unpredictability of most leadership challenges means they cannot be met by individual leadership.

An additional issue, highlighted by Keith Coates (*What will it take to develop Future Fit Leaders*) is the prevalence of a 'programmes' mentality – the thinking of leadership development as a deliverable, rather than as a complex and life-long learning process.

In the same way that mobile phone companies have grown in African markets by leap-frogging previous stages of mobile telephony development, leadership development in Sub-Saharan Africa should leap-frog previous approaches and start at the cutting edge of next generation of leadership development, in a way that is contextually appropriate for the needs of this continent at this time.

Part of this context is the widening skills gap in Africa. Demand for leadership skills continues to track ahead of supply in most regional

markets. This is leading to continued use of expats; to wage inflation; and to leaders being posted into stretch roles earlier in their careers and before they are fully equipped for success.

Africa has no lack of talent. But too often executives from the region fail to fulfil their full potential when stepping onto the regional or world stage.

In part this is due to differences in skill sets and experience. In part this is also due to learning based on the prevailing paradigms of leadership development (above).

But it is also about the difficulty all leaders have in navigating competing worldviews of leadership.

The global corporates operating in Africa often have a culture rooted in the North European emphasis on rational and scientific thinking. European leaders have harnessed this competency in planning, as well as scientific and technical innovation. Those corporates operating in Africa that are centred in the US are rooted in the Western American culture. Robert Reich called this leadership paradigm the myth of the individual hero. The Western American worldview puts emphasis on that individual lone hero who, through his individual nobility, independence, courage and conviction, saves organizations and communities from their fate. An additional cultural dimension is growing quickly in Africa as organisations from Asia expand across the region and bring their own worldview of leadership. This is centred on an intense commercial practicality and an emphasis on established relationships as a basis for trust.

But African leaders also have an opportunity to bring something valuable and unique to how organisations are lead, both regionally and globally.

As Archbishop Tutu puts it *“Africans have a thing called UBUNTU; it is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa is going to give to the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go that extra mile for the sake of another. We believe that a person is a person through other persons; that my humanity is caught up and bound up in yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms, and*

therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging.”

Building on this context Prof Lovemore Mbingi highlighted that the key values of African leaders emphasise servant leadership and contrast starkly with other worldviews of leadership. He described these values as;

- Respect for the dignity of others.
- Group solidarity: An injury to one is an injury to all.
- Teamwork: None of us is greater than all of us.
- Service to others in the spirit of harmony.
- Interdependence: Each one of us needs all of us.

In addition it's perhaps worth recognising that leaders and managers that operate in under-resourced African environments themselves - by necessity - become highly resourceful..!

Furthermore, African leaders have an unparalleled opportunity to develop advanced skills in cultural agility. The region is the most culturally diverse on earth and individuals are regularly required to navigate the tensions between competing organisational, national and community cultures.

Leaders and managers from Africa therefore have a potentially powerful and distinctive skill set based on their resourcefulness and their worldview of the servant leader.

These capabilities *should* allow them to go toe-to-toe with any of their international peers. But to fully unlock the economic potential of the region and allow sustainable growth these skill sets must be fully realised. To date they haven't been.

In our view we need a new paradigm of leadership development in Africa based on robust research and an empirical evaluation of how to rapidly build key skills in the region. This paradigm must see the acceleration of leadership development as a new norm and should recognise the need for learning to be relational; culturally contextual; based on current and future challenges; and be inclusive of the full spread of each individuals' stakeholders. Development must be grounded in learning that is on the job and is in the midst of real relationships and challenges.

Effective leadership development plays a vital role in helping African leaders, managers and entrepreneurs step with confidence onto a world stage and into a future that they themselves author.

The right learning solutions can unlock opportunity, both for individual participants and for the organisations and communities that they lead.

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