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ANALYSIS

# Can you lead effectively in Africa?

by Glory Enyinnaya On Jun 23, 2017

Leadership is one of the most important skills required in business. At the entry-level, the young manager needs leadership skills to effectively execute business strategy. At the mid to senior management level, the middle manager needs leadership skills to grow the business successfully and achieve business goals. At the top management level, the chief executive needs leadership skills to transform his business and take it to the next level nationally or internationally.

While there have been many books written on leadership in the West, academia has only recently begun to conduct an empirical study into the concepts of leadership in Africa. In 2014, an exploratory study considered an African perspective on leadership behaviour and motivation in Ghana, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda with a small sample of corporate, community, and religious leaders. The findings indicated that vision, commitment, honesty, goal-orientation, and humour were descriptors of effective leadership. In this article, we will provide a framework against which you can measure your leadership skills against these five ideals.

## The visionary leader

According to Manning and Robertson (2002) the "visionary" model of leadership asserts that the key function of leadership is to communicate a compelling vision, or picture of where the organisation is going. By having a clear and attractive picture of the future, people transform thought into reality and intention into action. They are energised or empowered because they have a sense of purpose or direction, combined with an enhanced belief in their ability to achieve their purpose.

The vision itself need not actually come from the leader, although he or she is likely to play a crucial part in formulating and communicating the vision. The actual source of the vision is what Kanter (1983) has called "kaleidoscope thinking", drawing together fragments of ideas from a range of sources. This is based upon a profound understanding of the relationship between the organisation and its environment, as well as receptivity to ideas of all interested parties.

The “visionary” model of leadership looks beyond the leader’s role in communicating a compelling vision and being tuned into the wider source of such a vision. It draws upon other theories of leadership and organisational change, highlighting issues at the macro, interpersonal and personal level.

### **The goal-oriented leader**

According to Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002), managers are all too familiar with goal setting these days. Not only do they have to plan their own days and set agendas for meeting annual performance targets, but they also have to do the same with each of their direct reports. Additionally, they participate in planning at the strategic business unit, division and corporate level. And they’ve been inundated with tools with which to make those plans – from daily activity-planning books to electronic Palm Pilots. No wonder managers complain of having to spend too much time planning, with few moments left over to do the actual work.

With all of this planning frenzy, what new information or tools could possibly be of use? Studies of people who have improved their emotional intelligence reveal several key points about what works and what doesn’t. Although some may seem obvious – even common sense – they are not common practice. The findings include the following:

- Goals should build on one’s strengths, not on one’s weaknesses
- Goals must be a person’s own – not goals that someone else has imposed
- Plans should flexibly allow people to prepare for the future in different ways – a single “planning” method imposed by an organization will often prove counterproductive
- Plans must be feasible, with manageable steps: Plans that don’t fit smoothly into a person’s life and work will likely be dropped within a few weeks or months
- Plans that do not suit a person’s learning style will prove demotivating and quickly lose his attention

### **The committed leader**

According to March and Weil (2005), heroic leadership demands great action and great commitment. Such commitment is usually justified by expectations of great consequences. The assumption is that the great actions that produce great changes in the world are sustained by a belief in their effectiveness.

A leader who has already tasted success is willing to take more risks and make more daring decisions. A culture of success stimulates a culture of exaggerated beliefs in capabilities, and thus an inclination toward risk taking.

Within a consequential logic, where action is motivated by hope of favorable consequences, faith in these potential consequences has to be effectively maintained (“you CAN make a difference”) even if this means ignoring the lessons of experience and intelligence. It is also possible, however, to undertake great actions outside a logic of consequences. An individual can be motivated by his or her faith in God (like Joan of Arc) or in the forces of history or by irrational causes. Regardless of one’s motivation, commitment is a sine qua non for effective leadership.

### **The honest leader**

According to Kouzes and Posner (2011), in virtually every survey they have conducted, honesty is selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. No matter where the studies have been conducted – regardless of country, geographical region, or type of organization – the most important leadership attribute has always been honesty.

Honesty is absolutely essential to leadership. If people are going to follow someone willingly, whether into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust. They want to know that the would-be leader is truthful, ethical and principled.

The benefits of honesty cannot be overstated. For Ian Foo, working as a consultant with Accenture in Australia, the importance of honesty and trust was demonstrated in the way his most admired leader kept his word: “Being honest means that if you make promises to people you never break them. You are only as good as your word: If you cannot deliver, do not offer your word.” Honesty earns the respect of others and fosters their confidence that leaders can be trusted to follow through on their commitments.

### **The humorous leader**

According to Baldoni (2009), just as no-one is above the law, no-one should be above using humor in communications. Humor is the great leveler; it brings out the humanity in all of us. While different cultures find different things funny, the single unifying factor is a desire to laugh. An appreciation of humor is essential to leadership and should be encouraged in the workplace. Humor in communications of leaders can support leadership intentions. It can help build stronger relationships among people, as well as help people get along better and, as a result, get things done.

•This article was written by Glory Enyinnaya for the Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics (CRLE) at Lagos Business School and edited by Ogechi Obiorah. CRLE's vision is creating and sharing knowledge that improves the way managers lead and live in Africa and the World. You can contact CRLE at [crle@lbs.edu.ng](mailto:crle@lbs.edu.ng).

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