

Leadership development: one size does not fit all

Within the domain of executive education, the concept of leadership development is an increasingly romanticised one. When we say 'leadership development,' more often than not, images of executive travel, luxury retreats, world class 'experts' delivering 'high-end management interventions' spring to mind, with management gurus flown across the globe to impart knowledge on organisational transformation. But the accepted approach taught in the majority of these standardised executive leadership development programmes across the globe fails to address one important issue: business and social culture around the world is diverse, and therefore a universal 'one size fits all' approach is flawed as it ignores two fundamental truths which empirical research brings to light:

1. **Leadership is a social construct** rather than a purely scientific phenomenon. Leadership 'knowledge' is constructed in the context of human interactions – leadership is, after all, about 'leading people.' Human beings are not static or isolated, but rather they can be seen as social actors, entrenched in a dynamic and interwoven social reality within which they base their perceptions, actions, interactions, and sense of meaning. Therefore whatever knowledge we might have about leadership has been developed within a wider framework of human interaction, which will be diverse across different cultures around the world.
2. **Leadership is contextual.** We know that human interactions, thoughts, dynamic exchanges and shared understandings of things occur in the context of the society and the socially-bounded space in which people find themselves. This social context itself is governed by cultural forces, meaning that leadership knowledge developed by practitioners around the world will be developed within a culturally-influenced context.

With these two insights in mind, it is clear that knowledge about leadership is not absolute, objective and universal, but rather more subjective and culturally contingent than we might think. Fundamentally, leadership is socially constructed, contextual and culturally contingent.

My research focuses on leadership development and emphasizes the need for more contextually sensitive approaches for participants from outside of the West and in particular, Africa. This rich and diverse continent gives a real example of the need for a contextually sensitive and culturally aware approach to leadership development programmes. Building leadership capacity is an important need in the region as economies struggle to develop and grow, however so far contemporary practice has in many cases continued to use a 'one size fits all' approach. It is sadly not far from the truth that many African societies have continued to flounder in leadership mediocrity.

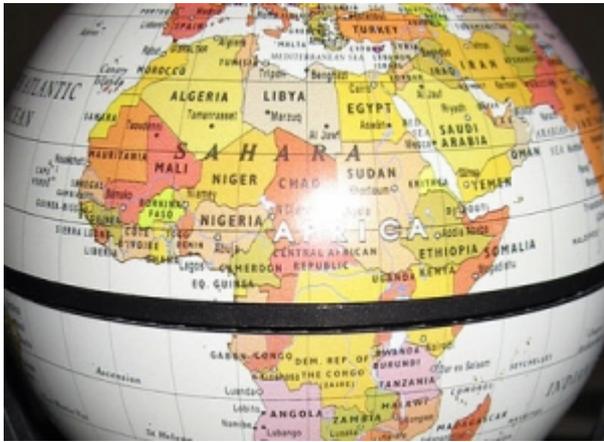
Western knowledge imperialism

Management educators will agree that most of the voices that presently shape the literature and accepted approaches to management and leadership arise from the Anglo-American scholarship belt. For example these are some widely used current leadership theories, which all originate from Western, Anglophone cultures: transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass 1985), situational/contingency models (Hersey & Blanchard 1977; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Adair, 1983), Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970), and more recently, distributed leadership (Bennett et al, 2003).

Indeed, not only has much of the modern published discourse on leadership originated primarily from the West, but to date, contemporary management education and leadership development – even in African Business Schools – has remained predominantly structured around this. Western thought-leadership has become more or less the canon for the cultivation of global business leaders, regardless of which part of the world in which those learning interventions actually occur

and executive learning programmes often come as pre-packaged solutions to pre-determined problems that have been designed to reflect the internationalisation and inter-connectedness of our world. Critics of this approach raise important questions about intellectual marginalisation during the process of knowledge creation.

Contextual contrasts



My research contributes to the emerging critical perspective of recent criticisms of knowledge imperialism on how we 'see' and 'know' the world. Findings from my qualitative study predominately focusing on Nigerian participants enrolled on a MBA Leadership Development module, shows a significant degree of contextual dissonance between the mainstream functionalist paradigms of leadership and the real-life, experiential reality of programme participants. Particularly, a manifestation of this dissonance is in the presence of a *strong community orientation* that appears consistent with Nigerian indigenous community

practices. This stands in contradiction with the *individualist* functionalist paradigms often presented in mainstream leadership discourse.

Rather than viewing leadership development as the *development of self*, programme participants often interpreted it in the light of *benefit to others* and the collective benefit it held for the wider indigenous community. As some participants put it:

'I am not here to only build myself, but so that I can go back and help others who couldn't afford to come on this programme'.

'... It is about the way you relate with people... leadership goes way beyond being a very sharp bright guy upstairs. Exceptionally bright people are often lost in themselves...techies, but when it comes to leadership, it's a different ball game'.

The conceptualization of *self within community* and the emphasized end of leadership development as a *benefit to others* and *for the greater good* is a theme that is consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of *ubuntu*, an African traditional concept fundamentally underpinned by the assumption that a person exists through and for his community. Often rendered as 'I am, because we are' (Malunga, 2006; Mbigi, 2005), the central tenet of *ubuntu* is underscored by cultural values of *reconciliation*, *reciprocity*, and *social sensitivity*, geared towards preserving *community* and *collective survival*. This concept is significant in deprived African communities facing economic hardship and difficult social circumstances, where resources are often scarce and the survival of the clan is a paramount concern (Chinouya, 2007; Iwowo, 2011).

Lessons for the future

While the reasons for the use of the one size fits all approach to leadership development might be a matter of intense speculation, it is necessary that we begin to critically address this issue. Because leadership is contextual and culturally contingent, its practice cannot be divorced from the specific socio-cultural context within which it occurs. Leadership development must begin to make contextual sense to its recipients, and to the social contexts in which they will be practicing as leaders.

This is a very significant issue for the development of would-be management and leadership practitioners in Africa. Within this culturally heterogeneous continent, global leadership development programmes targeted at leadership capacity building cannot ignore the cultural terrain, and must be held rigorously to account for the local cultural frameworks within which they

are applied. I believe that this is essential, if not urgently critical, to effective capacity building in Africa.

The notion of 'development' itself implies that something is already there to be developed, and leadership development can work to enhance the pre-existing, contextual characteristics and talents of the managers and leaders it is teaching. Rather than relying on traditionally accepted abstract learning, taking a new approach that is culturally-recognisable can provide solutions to avoid condemning leaders to mediocrity, and enable the development of real cutting-edge global talent in Africa and across the world.

Note:

- To learn more about this topic read '[Leadership in Africa: rethinking development](#)'
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About **Alina Vasile**

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