



## PUTTING SUCCESS IN CONTEXT

# What Kind of Leader Will Thrive in Africa?

By FRANCA OVADJE

An expatriate CEO sent from head office in London to an underperforming subsidiary in Nigeria found the situation there was far worse than imagined. He called an urgent meeting with all regional staff to highlight the problems as he saw them. Of the 250 staff, only 25 showed up. This, he shouted, was proof of their slack attitude toward work, and he stormed out. This dramatic act by the CEO sent the desired shockwaves through the company. But was it effective?

As corporate leaders increasingly find themselves working with diverse teams across borders, understanding the local context is crucial. Nowhere is this truer than in Africa, a vast continent with immense social,

economic and cultural differences. As Africa attracts greater interest and attention from multinationals, and as African companies expand their operations throughout the continent, their ability to understand and appreciate the distinct values, behavior, attitudes and styles of local contexts becomes decisive for achieving outstanding performance.

Allied to this is a growing recognition that successful leadership today requires the ability to inspire others. Inspired employees are more engaged in their work, they share a sense of ownership, they go above and beyond the call of duty, and they are more likely to carry out their assignments not because they have to, but because they want to. In short, they



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feel a strong sense of corporate citizenship. To be this kind of inspirational leader entails, again, a deep understanding and appreciation of what local people consider inspiring.

This article discusses the context-specific factors that any leader must take into account when managing people and doing business in Africa, mainly sub-Saharan Africa and in particular, Nigeria, the context that I know best as director of the Center for Research in Leadership and Ethics at Lagos Business School. I draw on several studies I have done, including a comparison of work attitudes and norms between Nigeria and the United States, and research on the values and aspirations of different generations in the Nigerian workplace, which are contained in *Change Leadership in Developing Countries* (Routledge, 2014) and my forthcoming book, *Talent Management in Nigeria*.

First, I will describe the general sociocultural context of sub-Saharan Africa. Then, I will highlight the appropriate leadership qualities, behavior, values and attributes that are needed to succeed in this context.

### Understanding Sociocultural Realities

Africa is certainly rising. In 2014, General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt announced a \$2 billion investment in African infrastructure, energy and skills over the next five years. Other corporations are following suit. With growth rates averaging 5 percent over the past decade, Africa has become an attractive destination, with China being a prime investor. Alongside this, a number of African businesses are internationalizing their operations, with MTN Group (South Africa), Computer Warehouse Group (Nigeria), Guaranty Trust Bank (Nigeria), Standard Bank (South Africa) and Equity Bank (Kenya) just a few of those that have opened subsidiaries in other African countries.

However, executives operating in Africa need to get behind the growth statistics. The opportunities may be huge, but so are the management challenges. Execution takes time – perhaps more time than in other places to achieve the desired results – which is why a manager coming into this context needs to get to grips with several important on-the-ground realities.

The following factors pervade all aspects of labor relations, people management and talent development, and will condition one's ability to get things done through and with other people – the very essence of leadership. Let's consider each in turn.

**HIERARCHY.** Organizations in sub-Saharan Africa tend to be hierarchical. There is a deep respect for those in authority: the more status and seniority, the more power ascribed to that person.

As power resides at the top, subordinates, even if they have great ideas of their own, will wait for their bosses to make the decisions, since they are regarded as the ones with the necessary knowledge and wisdom, which eventually trickles down to the rest. For this

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Africa. Then, she highlights the appropriate leadership qualities that are needed to succeed in this context. Finally, she reflects on whether the same principles hold true for the Millennial generation, based on her research of young Nigerian graduates. Their shifting preferences must be noted, she says, both to engage them today and also because they represent the African leaders of tomorrow.



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reason, subordinates will not challenge their bosses or even “agree to disagree.” In Nigeria, this is known as the *oga* (big boss) syndrome. The *oga* is all powerful and always right. Even when subordinates know the *oga* is wrong, they will say nothing out of respect.

When a problem arises, subordinates leave it to the top management team to resolve: they will know what needs to be done. As such, the majority of the knowledge, power and energy driving the company is concentrated in a small cadre of managing directors.

Subordinates, meanwhile, are waiting their turn until they become leaders, and then their ideas will be valuable. Until such time, their sense of ownership is very low.

**COLLECTIVISM.** Another characteristic is collectivism. In many African cultures, the “family” is not just the nuclear family but an extended family, clan or in-group to which the employee belongs and feels a strong sense of obligation. Sometimes it is this extended family that pooled their resources to put the employee through school. This is a tradition, particularly strong in Kenya, known as *harambee*, of pulling together for the common good. The needs of the extended family – who may be blood relatives but could also be family friends – are considered more important than one’s own personal interests, and everyone must take care of the group to which they belong.

The Igbo people, one of the largest ethnic groups in southern Nigeria, follow this pattern. They return to their communities every August and December, discussing the development of the clan and the needs of particular members. The group may decide to give some

material support to the child of a clan member who is not doing so well financially, for example.

Because employees probably will have received some support from more than one father figure in their lives, they will naturally ask for compassionate leave to attend the funeral of the “father” who provided for them, in addition to their biological father. Managers are expected to understand this and accommodate such requests.

Family heads govern in a paternalistic manner. Their loyalty is to the person, regardless of what that person has done. Applied to a workplace context, loyalty is shown more to the manager (the person) than to the organization. Employees are on the lookout for the person most deserving of their loyalty, and the loyalty they feel for that person will determine their own level of motivation. When coupled with the previous concept of holding the person on top in the highest regard, employees will look to the boss for cues on how to be successful in the organization. This means the CEO is on a pedestal 24/7, making whatever he or she does or doesn’t do extremely important and influential.

**RELATIONSHIPS.** Another important value in sub-Saharan African cultures is *ubuntu*, a concept of human kindness, which displays itself in the form of compassion, care and concern for others. Nelson Mandela is popularly considered a personification of *ubuntu* in the magnanimous way he reached across divides, affirmed people and worked to restore relationships, recognizing that one’s own humanity was intrinsically bound up with the humanity of others.

This humanistic philosophy informs workplace relationships, where a simple greeting becomes anything but simple; rather, it transmits the value you place on the welfare of a fellow human being. “How are you doing? Did you have a hard time getting to work today?” These are not perfunctory exchanges of pleasantries, but the leader is expected to have and show genuine interest in such things, and to inquire about the person’s family – sometimes each member of the family – as well.

For someone not used to this, it may seem that an awful lot of time is spent on preliminaries before getting down to business, and that you can never just make “a quick call,” as

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