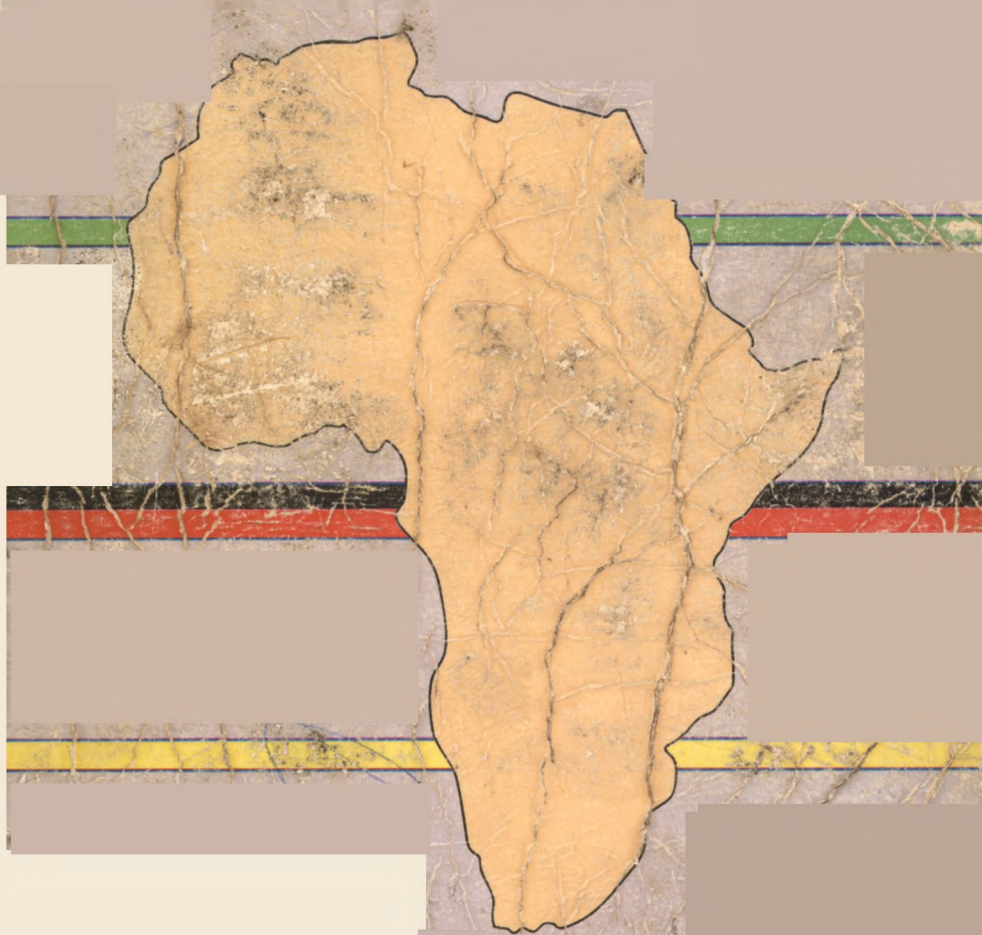


The Human Factor Approach to Development in Africa



Edited by

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Leadership and Accountability: Lessons from African Traditions

John L. Nkomo

Introduction

To clear my mind on what leadership and accountability mean, I first consulted the dictionary. I looked up the word 'leadership' then 'accountability'. I then put myself in the position of leadership and asked myself the question: 'Should I be accountable to anybody, given the authority and challenge to lead; or, should all those I lead be accountable to me or not for their performance?'

The temptation of leadership is, of course, to feel that you are in the centre and at the controls where everyone reports to you. Put another way, the feeling is that everybody must be accountable to you and that you have no obligation to report to anyone. Yet, in today's world, the emphasis is on the division of labour and on everyone contributing to the achievement of common goals rather than depending on the leadership for direction and motivation. In this regard, everyone is held accountable for the failure or achievement of missions and shared values. Shared responsibility is the driving force that challenges us to do certain things in certain ways, at certain times, to achieve certain goals and, as leaders, to provide conducive environments within which those we lead should perform to the fullest of their capabilities and aspirations.

To meet these challenges of the twenty-first century, such a new interpretation of leadership needs to be established. A new light needs to be shone on the beneficence of this new understanding of leadership. It is true that the achievement of security and peace in the world is a precondition for a stable and developing society. Therefore, where there are shared values and a common vision, the leadership should be seen to be exercising the Human Factor (HF) imperative of accountability to all for the achievement of such common goals and the socially shared values.

It is also true to say that, trust in oneself and respect for others are HF characteristics at the heart of authentic leadership. It is no longer adequate, if ever it indeed was, for a leader to be insulated or lead from the front. In today's world and, I am certain, for the foreseeable future, effective leadership comes from within if it is to respond to the HF development imperatives of the day. This is because effective leadership and not just any leadership, is built on inner strength. As I see it, that inner strength is the strength of a common vision that perceives and brings the best in oneself and others. It is also the strength that inspires one's actions as a model for others, the strength of self respect that enables one to be of service to others and, therefore, accountable to them and them in turn, accountable to the leadership for the achievement of a common destiny.

There is, therefore, no leadership without an obligation and accountability to the people. A leader leads people and must be accountable to them for helping them to see more clearly the direction they want to follow which, indeed and conversely, is the direction the leader wishes to follow together with them.

My dictionary says 'leadership' refers to a group of people who lead. The same dictionary says 'accountability' refers to the responsibility to give explanations for one's actions. But a democratic environment should prevail for leadership to carry out the programmes set before it by society and to fulfill its promises to achieve the expected goals and deliver the results to them.

The family and leadership

Society has evolved from man and woman. The two united to form the basic social nucleus we call the family. The coming of children into this set-up not only expanded the population, but also gave rise to the need for more provision in terms of food, security, clothing, shelter and space. All these came from land made available to the expanding family. The male members were, in theory, practice and nature, assumed to be the leaders of the basic social unit of families called the clan.

Indeed, those concerned about gender issues among us may seek to dispute the empirical evidence that the male in Africa has been the dominant factor in the leadership of the clan from the beginning of time.

I would agree that more research needs to be done on gender issues, to determine more precisely how society assigns roles between males and females. There may be a need to reverse some of the roles, particularly those which, up until now, have been the preserve of males. I can safely say, however, that such a reversal would imply a possible demolition of the social, cultural and historical basis upon which the African HF as a race with an identity has been anchored in space and time.

The patriarch had multi-faceted leadership responsibilities. He was the head of the household or family. He was the centre and defender of the family unit's personal and group security from any and all enemies. He was expected to be the principal breadwinner of the family unit. He was the family's clothing supplier. He was the provider of shelter for the family and the *de facto* provider of the space within which his family as a unit lived.

He attended to family morals and values and led in traditional rituals and spiritual ceremonies. He ensured that the departed ancestors and God the Creator were revered and accorded the respect and sacrifices due to them. The inyanga or n'anga (healers or doctors) and some such spiritual and traditional personalities, intervened in family matters at the patriarch's invitation. But they would not in any way seek, through their participation, to displace him from his overall leadership role. In many ways, the patriarch remained as the supreme local authority of his area, sharing space with other patriarchs and natural entities such as the animals that roamed the wild, the flora and fauna.

Leadership forms in these small, closely knit communities, were shaped or built around patterns of kinship. How any man or woman or clan behaved towards another

depended largely on how they were related. In a similar manner, how the community leaders behaved towards one another depended on the kinship between them.

The traditional leadership structure remains in place to this day even in the so-called modern African society and culture. The underlying philosophy is that the patriarch does not die with the home. He leaves behind a house, cattle and goats, and the home is not only his wife and children's place of residence but is the administrative, spiritual and social headquarters of all those people descended from his patrilineal lineage.

This fundamental perception of the African patriarch's leadership role and the centrality of the home — to which even divorced daughters would return, along with any aunts facing marital problems, or destitute sons and uncles — dictated the African people's approach to matters of inheritance. This is why the question of inheritance goes to the root of the post-matrimony debate in Zimbabwe today. In that debate, matrilineal tendencies seem to turn the home into 'a house' and the family unit into an expendable asset. At the base of these tendencies is agitation to alter the HF characteristics of African peoples and patterns of their leadership, and turn them into those dictated by the west.

Let me digress for a while in order to stimulate thought on implications to social stability which current tendencies towards social liberalization have on society as a whole. The patriarch led the clan not for his own purpose but for the good of the clan. He led in their interests and for their survival. He was answerable and accountable to his clan and its leadership in all its doings and he was accountable to society, the ancestors and God for the manner in which his clan group fared. Thus, he was accountable in both spiritual and secular practices. Hence, the question of HF characteristics such as responsibility and accountability in African traditional leadership teachings and practice did not end with the humans. It transcended the mundane world to reach spiritual realms as well.

But, we may ask, was there abuse of leadership authority within and without the family unit and clan? I would say yes. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Human beings being what they are, tend towards dictatorship, greed, gender inequality, selfishness and general abuse of power; and at times intra-clan and inter-clan conflict and military aggression. Because there also existed those who knew some forms of metaphysics, patriarchs and matriarchs alike, sought in many instances to lead through supernatural and magical powers and reliance on medicine-persons to strengthen and entrench themselves in their positions. Whether such practices worked or not, is perhaps, a question which today's leaders and scholars may want to tackle. This is a subject which should be intriguing to our politicians and members the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association.

In the overall family context, the patriarch or father as clan leader, had to be respected in life and in death. His spirit continued to provide protection to his children and grandchildren. If he did not, sickness and mishap befell the family. His grandchildren always deferred to their elders. In life grandparents led by tolerance and example and the relationship with their grandchildren thrived on both friendship and respect; the two being predicated upon good behaviour on the part of the young.

Of interest here is the Koran. All but one of the suras begin with 'in the name of Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful.' These are blessings which Moslems pronounce to invoke God's kindness and forgiveness. As already stated, the African believed in the appeasement of the departed and God for forgiveness. The living were accountable to the departed and God, and the departed were accountable to the living and also to God. The family's greatness were in its image, which was itself the product of such tradition, culture and the beliefs we are talking about.

The growing security and economic and social requirements of the expanding African family brought with them the need for social cohesion. The need for defence against the predator, howsoever defined, required that family and clan groupings forge closer ties. The extended families combined to form the village, 'umuzi' or 'musha' in Ndebele and Shona respectively. The village centred around the family of the (normally) strongest patriarch, who was allowed by either military might or general consensus, to assume the role of a village head (if the grouping was small), or headman (appointed by a paramount headman or chief, if the group was large). The new set-up was styled according to the people's requirements for security and economic and social co-operation. With the clustering of families in homesteads, arose the need to define and demarcate physical territory and identify a leader for the territory. Normally, the strongest military commander or orator or charismatic personality within the community assumed the leadership mantle.

Land and leadership

It is not possible to meaningfully discuss the question of African leadership and traditional lessons associated with it without briefly exploring the linkage of the traditional chief or patriarch or head of household, to the land. In general, all Africans do not regard their land simply as property or economic asset. To us, the land is intimately associated with our religion, which invariably links us to the history of chiefdoms along with the ruling chief and his ancestors. The traditional chief is inextricably tied to the land. He cannot be a leader if he has no land to preside over. As the controller of the soil which he believed he was given by God and the ancestors, the traditional chief was able to claim as under his jurisdiction, not only the soil, but everything that grew in it or fell on it or was found on it, including all the people and the tame and wild animals.

The joining of the physical and spiritual components of the chiefdom gave value to the chief's regard, not only of his leadership powers, but also of the value of each individual in society and the responsibility as leader that the chief owed to the individual. This intrinsic value given to the corporate chiefdom that the chief owed to the individual and his family unit within the chiefdom, set the baseline of the chief's accountability to his subjects and the departed. This is how leadership was perceived. The son of the chief, the headman, the village heads and the people in general, were taught these tenets from childhood. Hence the following in Ndebele 'Inkosi yinkosi ngabantu', or in shona 'Kunzi mambo ndimambo, vanhu'. (A chief is one because of his subjects).

African traditions taught that the ultimate dominion over the land and its people was in the hands of God, 'Unkulunkulu' in Ndebele or 'Musikavanhu' in Shona. Rains, good crops, animals and wild fruits came from God. He was the ultimate. While the human chief received gifts, tributes, honour and respect, God received praise and worship for his mercy in the past, the present and his guidance in the future. God entrusted the chief with tribal leadership and rights over the land. God was found in the land and in the skies that gave people rain. As the rain and the sunshine fell on both the good and the bad people, the chief was expected to be fair and just and to ensure the unity of the land. The land and its people, past, present and even future thus defined the leadership patterns and the identity of the chieftom.

The subjection of the chief to government that was brought to Africa by colonialism, has deprived the chief of the true essence of his status. Chiefs are now regarded as wielding less, if any, spiritual powers. Modern chiefs do not possess enough power or courage to engage in rituals and rites as their predecessors did. They were leaders, not appendages, to bureaucratic systems. The power of modern traditional leaders now comes from the government and not from their ritual connections with the departed and God. The then core values of traditional society have collapsed. Are there any lessons we can learn from the leaders of our traditional past?

Leadership obligations and responsibilities

Leaders in government departments, captains of industry and tertiary institutions, permanent secretaries heading public offices, local authority and civic leaders, as well as leaders in sport, art, culture and other disciplines, all ought to pause and reflect on the obligations and responsibilities of their occupations. These are positions of trust. The people they lead depend on them. Even those in subsidiary leadership roles have a lesson to learn. Our people have a wise saying: 'On your way up, be good to the people you meet, because you will meet them again on your way down'.

Another lesson we could learn has a bearing on how we manage local government. Modern forms of government have tended to lead from above, imposing development plans from above and attempting to change traditional norms and practices through legislation. The role of the traditional local leader has been severely compromised. As a result, local law and order has tended to break down. Local initiatives on development have been stifled and the traditional society has thus experienced a vacuum of traditional leadership at the grassroots. Society's cohesion has loosened if not totally non-existent.

Clearly, there is need to try and apply the qualities of responsibility, accountability and integrity found in traditional leadership, to the running of the western-type institutions that we have inherited. The Zimbabwe Government's current view is that we should harmonize the traditional and modern forms of leadership structures. To achieve this, Zimbabwe proposes to apply both the western democratic principles of government and the traditional at the local level through streamlining the functions and establishing clear accountability of these two to village and ward assemblies that we propose to set up. The Village and Ward Development Committees (Vidco/Wadco)

will remain elective institutions while the new village and ward assemblies will continue to represent classical traditional democracy, the 'dare'. At the same time, the elective Vidco and Wadco will form the support structure with the relevant technical expertise made available. The quota system for traditional leaders will, therefore, not apply in the village and ward assemblies, as these will be institutions within which their full participation will be required.

We further propose to have chief's representation at the rural district council level through ministerial appointment of a certain number of chiefs to each rural district council. The chiefs themselves will submit the names of their selected representatives for formal appointment to council so, the Minister will not dictate. These appointees will be expected to contribute their traditional views to council in matters of both development and social organization and regulation. We need not attempt to legislate wholesale for cultural or traditional change as all culture is already dynamic on its own. The local traditional leader has a role to play at rural district level, even in a 'modern' democracy. The rural societies still respect and acknowledge local traditional leaders, and we need to facilitate them more to promote economic, social and cultural programmes. Unless we recognize our Africanness and learn to identify that which is positive in our traditional leadership structures, we shall always strive politically to impose foreign ideas and programmes on our people. Ours, therefore, is to learn to combine traditional structures of leadership with modern democratic structures. We must harmonize these leadership forms rather than impose only one on our people. Their ability to accept the community as their family without partisan consideration, while combining this recognition with their traditional religious past, is invaluable to society. In any case, any development, if it is anything, must begin with the people and with a recognition of them.

Today's leadership

The problems that we encounter in establishing authenticity in leadership are enormous. Succession systems nowadays, are unstable. They are subject to political manoeuvres and dirty tricks. It is not what the leader can offer the community that matters anymore. It is, instead, what the community can benefit the leader with which propels many leaders into leadership. Democracy in the western sense has made leadership cheap. Rather than leadership being a calling requiring HF characteristics such as commitment, skill, capability, ability and accountability, leadership today has been turned into a marketable commodity. It is based on personal and partisan interests. It has largely become the domain of the crafty and dishonest. It is not prudent, therefore, for them to then seek to run for elective office at that level, as this is likely to undermine their standing in society. While recognizing western democracy, our policy of harmonization seeks to maintain a traditional anchor at the grassroots level.

In our research on traditional leadership systems, we came across the Kgotla system in Botswana. This is a consulate institution which central government, district councils and other public institutions use to communicate with grassroots societies and promote local government programmes. We concluded that the Kgotla would be inappropriate for Zimbabwe as it is merely consultative in nature. The situation that

has led us to review the role of our traditional leadership, calls for a stronger and directly involved traditional leadership rooted in our own society. Our approach is to arrest the state of decline in the rural areas, with particular focus on land and natural resources conservation, the maintainance of law and order through traditional systems, the upholding of traditional values and, generally, a recognition of the positive aspects of traditional society. We are, therefore, promoting a hands-on-approach to matters of governance and administration at the local level and, we are asking traditional leaders to be a part of the process and not continue to play passive roles.

Conclusion

Let me say in conclusion, that African teachings on leadership have tended to be more practice-oriented than theoretical. Therefore, the bulk of traditional teachings on leadership have tended to be garnered through apprenticeship and observation as the leaders led and, to a lesser degree, from oral traditions. Much as we may lament the demise of past traditional leadership core values and practices, our attempts at restoring the same may only represent an approximation, for the demands of elective democracy are upon us. We can only, therefore, compromise. We must compose a workable formula that enables us to combine the positive aspects of our past while allowing us to keep pace with modern developments. What we should watch out for is that we do not throw away the bath water together with the baby.



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