

# African Leadership: The Youth at a Crossroad

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership, mentoring and career development pose problem to any organization or institution. This is because most leaders, career developers and mentors, lack among other things managerial and communication skills. When leaders lack these skills they give poor and mediocre leadership; they create confusion among those to be led, mentored and to be developed. While some people are naturally leaders and work well with others without making excessive demands on them, there others who need proper training in leadership whether in a religious or secular community. In most cases leadership is acquired through a skillful training and ones' experience. For this acquisition to occur one must be in a position to understand personal development in addition to human behavior. Hence, there is a need to encourage research in the field of human behaviour and development. For successful leadership and mentorship to happen, two things are important among them the basic knowledge of group behavior, human relations and managerial skills and, secondly, training in applying these skills. Leadership comes with one's personality, attitude and perception. While leadership and mentorship are acquired and at times appear as natural realities, they are also improved through one's dynamic involvement with the people to be led and mentored. An excellent leader responds to peoples' needs and feelings with the hope of uplifting their lives by all means. A leader communicates clearly, precisely and with a lot of zeal about his or her work. The paper aims at evaluating the reality of leadership, mentoring and career development of the people particularly the youth of Africa. It further makes some recommendations on what ought to be done in order to improve on the life of those to be led and monitored among them human behaviour and development.

**Key Words:** Leadership, Mentoring, Human behaviour and Career Development.

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## 1.1 Introduction

In recent times the people of Africa have been faced with a milliard of problems among them the quest for accountable, responsible and transparent leadership. Many are the times when this desire has resulted into people asking or even urging for political revolution in their respective countries. The last few years have been a season of revolt in most countries in North Africa among them Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. There has been prolonged wars and conflict in such countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and Congo Brazzaville. The Rwanda genocide of 1994, politically instigated clashes in Kenya in 2007 and frequent rebellion in Uganda and Southern Sudan, have led one to ask whether or not accountable, leadership exists in Africa? Is it that African leaders lack the ability to lead, organize and respond to their people's needs? Why is that most of the African government are corrupt and have no traces for democratic ideals and values? Is there no room for ethical practice of leadership that is traceable among the African leadership? The question whether or not African leaders have been accountable to the people leaves a lot to be desired.

Where will the African youth learn from when their mentors appear to have failed? While mentoring is an essential leadership skill which should be applying in preparing the African youth, it appears to be lacking in the African situation. In addition to managing and motivating people, mentorship is also important that one can help others learn, grow and become more effective in their leadership position. This can be done through mentoring partnership, which individuals can arrange within organization or through a personal or professional network. The paper therefore attempts to highlights some elements pertaining to leadership and authority, leadership as a social process, describes briefly the African situation, and makes a conclusion which also suggests the way forward for the African youth and leadership.

## 1.2 Leadership and Authority

Erina Doyle and Mark K. Smith explore some of the classical models of leadership. In particular they look at earlier approaches to studying the area via the notions of traits and behaviors, and to what has become known as contingency theory. From there they turn to more recent, 'transformational' theories and some issues of practice.

Many of the images associated with leadership have their roots in conflict. It is the stuff of generals who outwit their opponents, politicians who convince and channel groups into action, and people who take control of a crisis. Individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Joan of Arc; Napoleon, Hitler and lately JF Kennedy, Teresa of Calcutta, and John Paul II. The stories around such people seem to show that there are moments of crisis or decision where the actions of one person are pivotal. They have a vision of what can, and should be, done and can communicate this to others. When these are absent there can be trouble. These are the sort of people the African continent has been lacking thus governing the youth to long for visionary leaders whose mentoring ability would bring about transformational change in their great continent.

Quality of leadership is, arguably, central to the survival and success of groups and organizations. As *The Art of War*, the oldest known military text (circa 400 BC) puts it, 'the leader of armies is the arbiter of the people's fate, the man on whom it depends whether the nation shall be in peace or in peril'.

### 1.3 Leadership as a Process of Social influence

In his works Chemers (1997) describes leadership as a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task. In other words and as a process, leadership maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal. Consequently, a leader must have followers. Positive leadership brings about the best results but only when it is made intelligent, thoughtful, planned, deliberated upon through a creative process. As a result, leadership carries a heavy burden of responsibility and challenges one to appreciate it (D'Souza: 22-23). This is the kind of leadership that the African youths have been yearning for and without which the Continent will always remain in leadership crises.

There are almost as many definitions on leadership as there are different peoples of the world. Many associate leadership with one person leading, guiding and directing. Four things stand out in this respect.

- a) To lead involves influencing others.
- b) Where there are leaders there are followers.
- c) Leaders seem to come to the fore when there is a crisis or special problem. In other words, they often become visible when an innovative response is needed.
- d) Leaders are people who have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and why. Thus, leaders are people who are able to think and act creatively in non-routine situations – and who set out to influence the actions, beliefs and feelings of others. In this sense being a 'leader' is personal. It flows from an individual's qualities and actions. However, it is also often linked to some other role such as manager or expert. Here there can be a lot of confusion.

In the recent literature of leadership there have been four main 'generations' of theory:

- a) Trait
- b) Behavioral,
- c) Contingency and
- d) Transformational theories.

It is important, as John van Maurik (2001: 2-3) points, to recognize that none of the four 'generations' is mutually exclusive or totally time-bound. The four generations are as important today as they were yesterday and non of the generations could exists on its own not even here in Africa where change has been continuous or at times confrontational particularly in West Africa whose most leaders were military officers thus causing military coups to attain leadership..

Although it is true that the progression of thinking tends to follow a sequential path, it is quite possible for elements of one generation to crop up much later in the writings of someone who would not normally think of himself or herself as being of that school. Consequently, it is fair to say that each generation has added something to the overall debate on leadership and that the debate continues (van Maurik: 3) and the quest of accountable leadership by the youth of Africa is therefore not misplaced.

This fourfold division of 'modern' (management) leadership can go under different titles (for example, charismatic rather than transformational leadership), and there are other possible candidates for example, the

skill-based approaches and self-management or shared leadership. However, these four formations can be seen as sharing some common qualities – and can be approached as variations of the ‘classical’ model of leadership that is required for the African people. The four elements are therefore inseparable when discussing the African youth and their quest for leadership

Leaders are people, who are able to express themselves fully, says Warren Bennis. 'They also know what they want', he continues, 'why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others, in order to gain their co-operation and support.' Lastly, 'they know how to achieve their goals' (Bennis 1998: 3). But what is it that makes someone exceptional in this respect? As soon as we study the lives of people who have been labeled as great or effective leaders, it becomes clear that they have very different qualities. One only has to think of figures like Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Wangari Mathai, Julius Nyerere and Mao Zedong to confirm this. A leader is a person with authority.

Consequently leaders have authority as part of an exchange: if they fail to deliver the goods, to meet people's expectations, they run the risk of authority being removed and given to another. It's the latter that has brought about revolutions in many North African states. When leaders tremble and misuse their authority, they also lose the spirit of interdependence that bonds them with their subjects. Those who have formal authority over the people may take this action. Followers, knowingly or unknowingly, accept the right of the person to lead – and he or she is dependent on this. The leader also relies on 'followers' for feedback and contributions. Without these they will not have the information and resources to do their job. Leaders and followers are interdependent. It is this connectivity that lacks in many nations thus causing either military coups or peoples revolution like it happened in the Philippines in 1990s and its now happening not only in the African states but also in Eastern Europe and in the Arab world.

Having formal authority is both a resource and a constraint. On the one hand it can bring access to systems and resources. Handled well it can help people feel safe. On the other hand, formal authority carries a set of expectations – and these can be quite unrealistic in times of crisis.

More inclusive and informal understandings of leadership offer some interesting possibilities, and bring about political and economic development of a nation. Proper leadership and youth mentorship will be required in all areas of African development agenda.

#### 1.4 The African Situation

Reading through African history one encounters a situation that can be described as pathological in nature. Having lived and studied in America the author of this paper can easily confirm that compared to the poorest states in the United States of America, the African continent appears to have been condemned to its oblivion: hunger, wars, harsh climatic conditions, corruption and economic turmoil. It is as if the gods have forgotten some of their own. The suffering in this continent can only be reverted if and when the youths of African have been empowered through proper education; technologically oriented form of education whose foundation is not only in basic sciences but also arts and humanities: holistic form of education. It would not be just to educate engineers, bankers and doctors without ethics and morals in their formation. In any African country one visit there appears to be a permanent question on all kinds of leaders: religious, cultural and most recently political leadership. The youth in these countries appear to be compounded with issues relating to their leaders. In this age and era of technology and from where everything seems attainable, the youth asks questions relating to the quality of leadership in their respective countries.

At times these youths are concerned with the mentorship processes they encounter in their development stages. It is a fact that at times they can only relate to a few leaders who have shown some differences in their leadership styles. The late Presidents of the Republic of South Africa Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and Kwameh Nkrumah of Ghana have remained as clear icons of what the African youth require. Others icons and who have shown good leadership qualities and which should be imitated by the youths include Steve Biko, Wangari Mathai and Desmond Tutu particularly in their courage to safeguard the rights of others and the surrounding environment. In most cases, the youths have been wondering as to who to imitate as their role models simply because most of the African leaders have been the source of conflict in their respective countries. Hence one has to understand the meaning of leadership in any given situation. It is therefore to say a few words on leadership, mentoring and career development in any African country. It is in the understanding of these concepts that one would be in a position to mold, purify and prepare candid leaders for the African people.

The African leadership appears not to have moved from this type of confrontational leadership which makes the some of the African state to appear as if they are failed states (See Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the failed state of Somalia). Here in Africa leadership is associated with the ability to govern advice and dictate on political and economic issues. At times African leadership is associated with one's abilities to organize and lead a community to a particularly end; it is also associate with courage and ability to confront issues affecting the community. Age is also another factor that defines African leadership; the older one is the better sought for leadership position. This last factor has in most cases isolated the young people as they are advised to wait until they have become of age to lead. But today the African youth demands for justice, protection of human rights which are seldom violated in almost all African states, employment and clear source of livelihood.

As a result of the above observation, the African youth is asking for a different type of leadership away from the traditional conceptualization of who ought to lead. Hence the African situation calls for a change or shift in leadership paradigm. It is no longer the issue of age and elders dictating on the people of Africa but a new generation that challenges for the inclusion of the spirit of accountability, transparency and responsibility in leadership.

Another factor that influenced African leadership was culture-the way of life. African cultural values dictate that particular elements of culture be included in leadership thus clan and ones lineage isolated some people from the position of power. This was very common among, the Gikuyu and among the Masai of Kenya. These two groups of people would not allow both women and the young to lead their communities. This practice was also prevalent among many other tribes of Africa. At independence most European nations left African leadership in the hand of very old men who had no room for the youth (See Presidents Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Kwameh Nkrumah, just to mention but a few of the old guards). During their reign a number of young people lost their lives through political assassinations which at times brought about revolutions or creation of political oppositions which would in turn be clashed and leaders detained. There was no single African leader at the time whose time would be wasted on negotiation for inclusion leadership not even Kenyatta would have accommodated the view of the young generation then of Tom Mboya and Joseph M. Kariuki. When the views of the latter would be accommodated by the majority in Kenya, the government had no such room other than to look for ways to silence them. This must be said about other young people who were either detained or went into exiles simply because there was no room for their perceived radical views.

### 1.5 Conclusion and Way forward

Since most of the African states attained their political independence from the former colonizers there has been a search for accountable and transparent leadership. Cries for democratic governance and demands for constitutional leadership continue to be heard across the continent. The young people have therefore been in the lead particularly where they have left out in positions of leadership. These cries have been there particularly in a number of African countries where democratic culture is yet to penetrate political leadership. As pointed out in this paper, the revolutions occurring in North and Central African states, speak volume what the people of Africa require: accountable, transparent and responsible government. For this to happen democratic ideals have to be appreciated and nurtured in the mind of the African people.

The majority of the African population happens to be youth clamoring for democratic ideals and in most cases corruption-free kind of leadership. Hence African situation calls for paradigm shift, a call to social action and requirement for transformational leadership. This does not rule out the fact that the moral qualities of individual youth yearning for leadership will not be considered as they are recruited to these positions. This is because in the earlier scenario the older one was the better the chances of becoming a leader by extension the older people were considered to be incorruptible, wise and without excesses of material goods. Nevertheless, this wisdom did not last for long because as soon as the African leaders were in position of power, they became corrupt and desired to protect their own relatives and property. This is the situation that the African youth should avoid once they have been elected into political leadership.

The current state of affairs challenges the youth to call for inclusive leadership. Hence there is a need to change the leadership style in continent and create a new energetic situation that will salvage the little that remains in gold mines, cultural and natural resources and which for a long time has been looted by the former colonizers as well as the African persons themselves. The African youth is therefore challenged to close the gaps of corruption, immoralities as well as ethnic scenarios existing in this continent. This can only be achieved if and

when the youth have been involved in areas of leadership and governance which currently have left the African youth at a crossroad.

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