

In what way does leadership in Africa have to change and adapt to effect successful transformation of the continent (however success may be defined)? How can this leadership change be brought about or accelerated?

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On leadership: lessons from Fact, Fiction and Fantasy

Leadership is a verb

For the purpose of this essay, I will borrow from the frameworks on exercising leadership from the works of Professor Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky¹ of the Harvard Kennedy School. To paraphrase Heifetz, before you address the need for leadership, one ought to understand why it exists. Broadly speaking, we can define challenges (or problems) into two categories; technical and adaptive.

For technical problems, we may assume them to be well defined, with known solutions. For example, how to make fire, or lift weights, or keep warm, or feeling hungry (in the literal sense – for food). These technical problems have solutions which can be taught, can be learnt and can be shared with a reasonably high expectation of a predictable outcome, once the problem is addressed. These could also be categorised as primal problems, as mankind has grappled with these since the dawn of time; or, using Maslow's hierarchy of needs², fit neatly along the lower rungs. To address technical problems, mankind evolved the creation of authority positions for occupants to have the formal 'permission' to solve these problems. In the wider society, we can quickly identify authority figures based on the titles they have been ascribed and possessing well-defined job descriptions; class Teacher, President, Manager, Director, CEO, Representative, Garbage Collector, Firefighter, Lifeguard, Driving Instructor and so on. The recurring theme here being that these are nouns.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are less well defined, with mostly unknown solutions and, crucially, require a degree of learning (and, perhaps, unlearning) to address them. Compared with technical challenges, they have a relatively lower expectation of what the

¹ <https://hbr.org/2002/06/a-survival-guide-for-leaders>

² <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

outcome (or success) will be once they are addressed. Examples of adaptive challenges include; feeling angry, racism, sexism, forgiving and inspiring people. Those who address adaptive challenges may or may not have formal titles (formal or informal authority to do the work). This is partly why addressing adaptive challenges requires a different suite of skillsets, which are not easily understood, learned or shared. While there might be well-defined ways of addressing technical problems, adaptive challenges require a measure of intellectual, emotional (and perhaps, spiritual) creativity that introduces multiple pathways to achieving success. Most aptly stated for addressing adaptive challenges, “There’s more than one way to skin a cat” as written by Seba Smith in his work, *Way down East; or, Portraits of Yankee Life*³. In summary, you can define whether one is dealing with a technical problem, or adaptive challenge, based on the nature or the form in which it presents itself. Leadership is required in addressing adaptive challenges, while you need to exert (or assert) authority for technical problems.

Leadership, therefore, is not an identity; especially not in the classical sense. People identify by gender, genetic traits, religion, academic discipline, alumni affiliation, nationality, diet preference, political ideology, movie genre preferences and so on. Leadership is not a title which can be foisted on anyone; leadership is what one does, not who one is. It is not a permanent state of being. Leadership is a verb.

Leadership is exercised to address adaptive challenges, when a person or group of people need to address a difficult reality, not well understood, for which the solution is also not known.

The arc of human history is replete with examples of individuals and groups - both with formal and informal authority - who have exercised (and continue to exercise) leadership, with varying degrees of success; the Not too Young To Run movement in Nigeria, the Soweto Uprising of 1976 as well as the Rhodes must fall, the Fees must fall movements and the independence movement in South Africa, the Kwibuka remembrance program in Rwanda, the Arab Spring in the Middle-East and North Africa and most recently, the protests against Anti-extradition in Hong Kong. Exercising leadership is not restricted to partisan politics. We have

³ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Way_Down_East,_or,_Portraits_of_Yankee_Life

people exercising leadership in bringing social issues to the fore; the #MeToo movement and the work of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya are good exemplars.

Memento Mori

In her book⁴, *The Roman Triumph*, Professor Mary Beard paints a vivid picture of the pomp and pageantry around returning war Generals, incoming Governors, Tribunes and Emperors, who would parade through streets of Rome on a chariot, sometimes with spoils of war and or captured slaves in tow. The objective of the ceremonial procession was to idolize the Principal and show them honour. One crucial aspect of this was the presence of a slave, standing in the carriage behind the principal, or walking very close-by, whispering the words “*Respice post te. Hominem te esse memento. Memento mori!*” (“*Look behind. Remember thou art mortal. Remember you must die!*”) The slave’s sole job was to remind the Principal that they were mortal and that, while they were expected to revel in the procession of the Triumph, they were not to become seduced by the occasion.

This summarises my opinion of some people who attempt to exercise leadership. A major prescription for those wishing to exercise leadership is to understand their primary driver(s) for doing so – be it aspiration; that which they wish to contribute, or ambition; that which they wish to acquire for themselves. Both are valid and satisfy human needs. Once these drivers are well understood, it becomes easier to understand where their personal ‘hungers’ lie (things from which they derive personal satisfaction) and how they can be managed without detracting from the work of exercising leadership. Unchecked hungers are conduits for seduction; a quagmire in which the works of many have been undone. We have seen examples of authority figures lose opportunities for exercising leadership through a lack of management of their hungers. The creeping weights of corruption, and kakistocracy are clear examples of how unchecked hungers erode the ability to focus on the work of leadership.

⁴ Beard, Mary. (2009) *The Roman Triumph*. Harvard University Press

Recent examples may also be found in the South Africa, where Winnie Mandela was alleged to have used her formal authority (over a youth sports group) to commit a homicide, contributing to her losing pride of place in the post-apartheid era and the use of her 'voice' as a global campaigner for social justice and freedom. In the US, William (Bill) H. Cosby Jnr. used his authority position to assault women, leading to his prosecution and incarceration and the loss of his 'voice' as a campaigner for social justice and racial equity – a work in which he had achieved so much. Another is with Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, whose defiance of a military regime elevated her into an iconic figure in the global fight for justice and equality. Upon her release and entry into the authority arena, however, her seeming ambivalence (and in some cases, denial) towards the suffering of the Rohingya Muslims and refugees have led to her global 'voice' being muted. In these examples, unchecked hungers have contributed to silencing and distracting from the exercising of leadership and may cause people to withhold trust in the individuals who are attempting to exercise leadership.

The pomp and pageantry of modern-day 'triumphs'; whether through titles (top X under X list), Honourary degrees, elite social networks (e.g., Tutu Fellows), or even photographs with and access to famous personalities, are seductive in nature, with little room created for a *Memento Mori* reminder. This, I believe, is one of the reasons why those who attempt to exercise leadership in Africa fail.

Exercising leadership is not a sprint; so it cannot rest solely on the shoulders of one person. It is a marathon within which there are relay races occurring in multiple phases. Therefore, to exercise leadership successfully, requires multiple people exercising leadership (some together, others at different stages of the marathon) and so baton exchanges between leadership phases / stages are as important as how leadership is exercised within any given stage / phase. This could be looked at as succession planning, but it is more nuanced; it requires the person currently exercising leadership to recognise when they are needed and when they need to step away (because a different type of leadership is required for the next phase). One tool in ensuring a good transition between leadership phases is leveraging formal authority (appointed by Presidents, elections, etc...) A recent example of this was in Ethiopia, where Hailemariam Desalegn stepped down as Prime Minister (not before freeing previously

detained dissidents) and created the enabling environment for a new generation of political authority figures (led by Abiy Ahmed) to emerge.

The greatest risk to exercising leadership is hubris – or a belief in the infallibility of one’s ideas/perspectives/opinion. One way to reign this in is to build a curious, teachable heart; not easily seduced and the ability to be held accountable by a circle of well-selected confidants. There is, of course, a marked difference between a confidant and an ally. Confidants are permanently on the journey of leadership and allies may give and withdraw their allegiance at various points of the journey. Think of allies as the spectators watching the relay marathon (they may cheer or boo any of the athletes, based on the moment, at any point during the race) and confidants as the physio, psychologist, coach etc (who are unwaveringly committed to the cause of winning). Using Nelson Mandela as an example, he had allies around the world, but he also had close confidants with whom he shared his deepest thoughts and received counsel. Allies may be confidants, but confidants are always allies. Mistaking allies for confidants could lead to negative consequences for those wishing to exercise leadership. This may explain why some authority figures⁵ and those exercising leadership feel betrayed when allies turn their backs on them.

Watching out for hubris helps to stave off the messianic complex of ‘one person who can solve it all.’ This perhaps explains some of the reasons why the Banking sector in Nigeria thrives on the personalities of founder CEOs⁶, who are no longer in the authority roles but bear an overwhelming influence on their corporations and the wider industry. Perhaps it also helps to explain the stunted thinking around private enterprise in Nigeria⁷ and why there are so few exemplars of thriving businesses cited by Government.

Of course, for the messianic complex to set in, one needs a willing, co-opted audience⁸. Perhaps, as with the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, people have projected their hopes and aspirations (or ethical qualities) on her to her detriment. She appears to disappoint audiences who extrapolated from her struggle in Myanmar to extend to all struggles for social justice. It

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katecooper/2019/08/18/why-leaders-shouldnt-be-driven-by-ego-when-they-think-theyve-been-betrayed/>

⁶ <https://allafrica.com/stories/201002011487.html>

⁷ <https://www.africanliberty.org/2016/03/26/feyi-fawehinmi-federal-republic-of-dangote/>

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-20/myanmar-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi-victim-to-western-expectations/9566300>

could be argued that Paul Kagame of Rwanda is an example of an individual on whom people project their hopes and aspirations, making his work of exercising leadership that much more difficult.

Exercising leadership ought to bear fruits; reforms, renewal, transformation, etc. The fruits of success will be clear. Understanding that exercising leadership is not necessarily a positive thing – after all, apartheid was the fruit of a successful leadership exercise – from the evidence of development in Africa in the public sector, there is need for many more people to (be given the space and freedoms to) exercise leadership for transformation and progress. The task cannot be left to authority figures alone (these are finite in number).

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said that “an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man” [person/individual], I would like to qualify that by stating that a (successful) institution is the fruit of exercising leadership. It may stem from the idea of one person, but it requires a coalition of allies to make it successful. In the political space, those who truly appreciate the nuanced quagmire, in which a few African economies find themselves realise that exercising leadership for economic, social and political transformation will require intergenerational effort and no single individual or group has all the answers. Anyone can exercise leadership. A major barrier to doing this is conquering fear.

In a Galaxy far, far away...

The hardest job in exercising leadership is getting people to see the difficult reality which they face and co-opting them to doing the hard work of building a better future. In my opinion, a lot of the hubris coming from those attempting to exercise leadership, or exert authority, stems from deep seated fears – this is a dangerous starting point from which to exercise leadership. The counterbalance to this is to exhibit courage. Courage, may be defined⁹ as “The state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger, fear, or vicissitudes with self-possession, confidence, and resolution; bravery.” The root word for courage is Kerd¹⁰, meaning heart. One source of inspiration on the need for imbibing courage may be taken from the Bible, where individuals and groups are charged to “be of good courage”, to “not be

⁹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition

¹⁰ Ibid

afraid”, to “fear no evil”¹¹. To allow oneself to be afraid [of a person, situation, condition or thought] is to acknowledge the power of its source over them.

To summarize why addressing fear is important in exercising leadership, I take a quote from the wisest fictional character created in cinema history; Jedi Master Yoda¹², from the science fiction fantasy saga, *Star Wars* “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Exercising leadership is not necessarily done in the absence of fear; it is the ability to focus on the task at hand in spite of the risks (of failure) involved. If anything, the need for exercising leadership exists because of the vacuum created by the failure to change (or address the challenges), caused by fear. Courage thrives in an atmosphere of fear.

Change is difficult because people or groups who need to do it fear (real or perceived) losses. The courage to accept that African economies are lagging behind the rest of the world and the quality and focus of leadership needs to increase requires an admission that we are not (yet) the best version of ourselves. This is a hard pill to swallow, but one which requires humility, a curious mindset, a commitment to unlearn unprofitable behaviours and adopt new ones. A change in how leadership (mostly confused with authority) is exercised in Africa will itself require exercising leadership.

Identifying, supporting and protecting those who have begun to exercise leadership is crucial in building a critical mass for African transformation. One way to accelerate the growth of this critical mass of people or groups is to provide the means to define adaptive challenges, the skills to discern between technical problems and adaptive challenges; the platform to communicate the ‘difficult reality’; and the support to manage ‘hungers’ and fortify courage.

The tools (or skillsets) for exercising leadership can be taught. In Africa - perhaps due to extended periods of colonial domination, coupled with mostly weak first-generation independent leadership institutions – the skills for exercising leadership aren’t widely taught

¹¹ John 14:27; Joshua 1:9; Isaiah 43:1; Psalm 23:4. Holy Bible: The New King James Version. 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson

¹² Star Wars. Episode I, The Phantom Menace. Beverly Hills, Calif. :Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013.

and those who dare do so mostly find themselves excluded, ostracised, silenced or assassinated (metaphorically or literally).

In conclusion, therefore, for those who wish to exercise leadership in Africa, they must fulfil the following primary tasks; first, determine the nature of the adaptive challenge, next understand your personal aspirations and ambitions and acquire the skills to manage your 'hungers', and finally, do not be driven by fear.

Everyone understands success when they 'see' it, very few – if anyone at that – can codify and predict, with a reasonable level of confidence, how to succeed and the chances of achieving this. This is the highest challenge for mankind and one which we will always grapple with. As C.P Cavafy stated in the poem *Ithaka*:

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich...

Success is getting knocked down 99 times and rising 100 times. To quote Nelson Mandela "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." The courage to do so is the wellspring from which leadership bursts forth.