

Spirituality and Leadership in a South African Context



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Abstract This chapter discusses spirituality and leadership in a South African context. Leadership theories that are situated in the spiritual paradigm such as authentic, servant, spiritual and transformational leadership are considered in this chapter. It is argued that leadership practices and styles in South Africa are heavily influenced by British and American approaches. The notion of “*ubuntu*,” which is a central component of Afrocentric leadership is thus largely ignored in literature on the topic. This chapter draws attention to the influence of Western approaches on leadership in South African organisations with particular reference to the Afrocentric notion of *ubuntu*. It is recommended that further research be undertaken on *ubuntu* leadership in the South African context and beyond. Another recommendation is that research should be undertaken on blending Afrocentric and Eurocentric leadership styles in order to identify how this combined leadership approach can be implemented in South Africa.

1 Introduction

With the rise in unethical behaviour and recent business scandals around the world, many organisations are now focused on hiring leaders who understand the workplace and lead “with their heart and soul” (Siddiqi et al. 2017, p. 63). Leadership is not easy during difficult times, and with the current complexities confronting organisations globally, it is imperative that there be a new type of leadership (George 2003), a leadership that is genuine (Avolio and Gardner 2005, p. 316).

Kakabadse et al. (2002) assert that spirituality is a dimension of leadership that has long been overlooked. Yukl (2005) notes that there is no generally accepted definition of spiritual leadership. Spirituality is defined by Stamp (1991, p. 80) as “an awareness within individuals of a sense of connectedness that exists between inner

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selves and the world.” Kouzes and Pozner (1987, p. 30) indicate that “leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.” According to Reave (2005) spiritual leadership occurs when individuals in leadership positions demonstrate values such as trustworthiness, integrity, truthfulness and humility. He points to the sound connection between spiritual values and successful leadership, noting that spiritual leadership is “demonstrated through behaviour, whether in individual reflective practice or in the ethical, compassionate and respectful treatment of others” (Reave 2005, p. 663).

The effectiveness of classical leadership theory, which focuses chiefly on the roles, responsibilities, traits and skills of leaders rather than the consequences of their actions, has been widely questioned (Duthely 2017). Pruzan and Pruzan-Mikkelsen (2007) believe that the leaders who will be successful in the twenty-first century will be those who demonstrate a spiritual dimension.

Galperin and Alamuri (2017) point to the scarcity of research on African leadership. Punnett (2017), Nkomo (2011), Lutz (2009) and Fry (2008) note that the majority of literature on leadership has been written from a Western perspective and lacks insight into the characteristics of effective leadership in an African context. Galperin and Alamuri (2017, p. 39) indicate that research which examines “Western-based management theories” in Africa makes scant reference to the local context and local cultural matters. Leadership practices and styles in South Africa are heavily influenced by British and American approaches (van den Heuvel 2006). The notion of “*ubuntu*,” which is a central component of Afrocentric leadership (Yawson 2017), is thus largely ignored in literature on the topic.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss spirituality and leadership in South Africa. This chapter examines the influence of Western approaches on leadership in South African organisations with particular reference to the Afrocentric notion of *ubuntu*. The rest of the chapter is organised as follows: Sect. 2 discusses leadership in South Africa, Sect. 3 examines *ubuntu* leadership, Sect. 4 looks at four leadership theories in the spiritual paradigm, namely, authentic, servant, spiritual and transformational leadership, while Sect. 5 concludes the chapter.

2 Leadership in South Africa

Africa is portrayed by many authors as being under-developed, poverty stricken, overtaken by corruption, characterised by unsuccessful corporate and government sectors and ineffective political leadership (Kiruhi 2017). Adei, who specialises in African leadership claims that leadership plays a vital role in the transformation of countries (Kiruhi 2017). Rothberg (2003) contends that Africa’s socio-economic, political and governance challenges can be attributed to bad leadership.

In 1994 South Africa became a democracy and Nelson Mandela was elected as the first democratic president. The country has a rich diversity of people. According to Statistics South Africa (2017) the population stands at 56.52 million and consists of 80.8% Africans, Coloureds make up 8.8%, Whites make up 8% and Indian/Asians 2.5%. However, even after 24 years of democracy, black Africans are underrepresented

in management and leadership positions while white males continue to be overrepresented (Booyesen 2001).

The Employment Equity Report for 2016–2017 indicates that in South Africa, 50.8% of top management positions are held by white males (mainly in the corporate sector) and 10.9% by white females. In comparison, only 9.2% of top management positions are held by African males and 2.8% by African females (Department of Labour 2017). This disparity in the South African workforce means that South African organisations are characterised by a Western leadership style (Lutz 2009), with corporate culture being dominated by an Anglo-Saxon approach (Dube 2016). Despite this, South African businesses have seen a steady increase in “an Afrocentric approach to management” (Booyesen 2001, p. 37), embodied by the concept of *ubuntu*.

In South Africa, business leaders were traditionally required to lead “Eurocentric, autocratic and hierarchical conglomerates which were based on Western value systems but in the post-apartheid era, they find themselves leading a multicultural workforce that is more collectivist and less competitive” (Shrivastava et al. 2014, p. 49). Due to this diversity of cultures in South Africa, effective leadership is particularly challenging. The dichotomy between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism thus poses a crucial challenge for managers and leaders (Booyesen 2001).

In a study conducted by Booyesen (2001) on the management and leadership styles of black (Afrocentric) and white (Eurocentric) managers in the South African corporate sector, it was found that:

- Black and white managers both avoid uncertainty or risk. However, white managers score highly on uncertainty avoidance and demonstrate “more worry about the future” while black managers show an “average uncertainty avoidance” score with a “greater readiness to live for the day” (Booyesen 2001, p. 55);
- White managers are highly individualistic, display characteristics of “autocratic dictators” and consider that “organisations are not expected to look after employees.” In contrast, black managers are highly collectivistic and inclusive and seek consensus before making decisions (which may be perceived as being indecisive). They believe that “employees expect organisations to look after them and can become alienated if organisations dissatisfy them” (Booyesen 2001, p. 56);
- White managers are highly assertive and are “direct and aggressive” whereas black managers are “less direct and more face-saving” (Booyesen 2001, p. 55);
- White managers are strongly future-oriented and “due dates, schedules and promptness are important.” Black managers have a low future orientation and “relationships are more important than time” (Booyesen 2001, p. 55);
- White managers have a low human orientation and demonstrate “unfair and selfish behaviour.” Black managers have a high human orientation and display “respect and concern for all employees” (Booyesen 2001, p. 56);
- White managers have a high performance orientation and “tradition, convention, saving face and social reciprocation are not so important.” Black managers, on the other hand, score above average in performance orientation and “tradition, convention, saving face and social reciprocation are emphasised” (Booyesen 2001, p. 56).

The history of the workplace in South Africa has traditionally focused on production, with less emphasis placed on human relations between top management and their employees (Msila 2015). Leadership has predominantly been transactional, with leaders seeking to ensure that contractual obligations are fulfilled. This has often resulted in employees being treated as less than human beings (Msila 2015). Galbraith (1977) notes that transactional leadership emphasises control through compliance with rules.

Unsurprisingly, labour relations in South Africa are often strained and characterised by violence (International Monetary Fund 2013) while its labour laws are inflexible (World Economic Forum 2017). An extreme example of this occurred on 16 August 2012 when the Marikana massacre took place and 34 striking platinum miners were killed by the South African police (Alexander 2013). Msila (2015) points out that an *ubuntu leadership* approach can be followed in order to improve human relations between leaders and followers without sacrificing production.

Unethical leadership practices in the public and corporate sectors in South Africa are widespread. Multinational enterprises such as KPMG, SAP and McKinsey have been implicated in scandals regarding unethical business practices involving the Gupta family in South Africa.¹ The biggest corporate scandal in South Africa in recent years involved Steinhoff International, a prominent South African retailing company, which committed accounting fraud and is currently being investigated in South Africa and Europe.²

Corruption in South Africa's public sector is rife. For instance, the country's score on the Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 was 44; in 2016, the score was 45 while in 2017 it dropped to 43³ (Transparency International 2017). A score that is close to 0 implies that corruption is very high while the closer a score is to 100, the greater the freedom from corruption (Transparency International 2015). Former South African president, Jacob Zuma, was recalled by the ruling African National Congress party on 13 February 2018 for his implication in numerous corruption cases relating to state capture⁴ with the Gupta family as well as 18 criminal charges for 783 instances of fraud and corruption.⁵ South Africa's state-owned enterprises such as Eskom (electricity), the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, South African Airways, the South African Broadcasting Corporation and Transnet (transportation and infrastructure) are on the brink of collapse due to poor leadership, corruption, fraud and financial mismanagement.⁶ South Africa's

¹For more information, see Pilling (2017) KPMG Urged To Act Over South Africa Gupta Scandal.

²For more information, see Lungisa (2017) The Steinhoff Debacle—The biggest fraud in SA history.

³For more information, see Transparency International (2017) Corruption Perceptions Index 2017.

⁴For more information on state capture, see Bhorat et al. (2017) Betrayal of the Promise: How South Africa is Being Stolen.

⁵For more information, see Umraw (2018) All The Damage Jacob Zuma Has Wrought Over His Tenure.

⁶For more information, see eNCA (2017) All SA's State-Owned Enterprises Captured: Deputy President.

new president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has sworn to eradicate corruption, fraud, state capture and mismanagement from the public sector.⁷ This prevalence of corruption in the country's public sector is seen as occurring due to a departure from *ubuntu* leadership (Yawson 2017).

3 Ubuntu Leadership

Msila (2015) states that numerous African authors have called for the implementation of *ubuntu* leadership on the African continent. *Ubuntu* is a concept stemming from Bantu languages and means “humanness” (Ngunjiri 2010, p. 763). It has further been defined as meaning “I am because we are” (Swanepoel et al. 2009, p. 360). *Ubuntu* is not simply a particular type of management; it is a “humanistic philosophy—an African humanism, which focuses on people and provides some guidelines for leadership style and management practices” (Booyesen 2001, p. 38).

Msila (2015) explains that the concept of *ubuntu*, which is strongly linked to African spirituality, has been in existence for many years and predates colonisation. *Ubuntu* implies care, respect, tolerance, compassion, communality, protecting others, living selflessly and is linked to “servant” leadership (Lutz 2009; Msila 2015). Swanepoel et al. (2009) state that *ubuntu* is a leadership style which emphasises a collectivist rather than an individualist approach. Msila (2015) stresses, however, that *ubuntu* is far from fostering mediocrity by limiting competition in organisations. Instead, it promotes competition within the context of collective values and excellence (Msila 2015).

At the heart of *ubuntu* is concern for the individual, the idea of “servanthood,” the interests of the team and achieving prosperity for all (Booyesen 2001). Ntuli (as cited in Msila 2015) argues that many African leaders have lost their moral compass because they have failed to practice *ubuntu* leadership, embracing instead the values of greed and self-interest. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017) state that the main purpose of a business that implements *ubuntu* principles is not profit maximisation but the promotion of harmonious relationships with stakeholders, especially with employees. Mangaliso and Damane (2001) regret that *ubuntu* has not been adequately implemented in workplaces in South Africa and indicate that its benefits to organisations have not been properly understood.

Yawson (2017) points out that there are some firms in South Africa which are successfully incorporating *ubuntu* into their business models. Examples cited include South African Airways, Eskom, MTN, CIDA City Campus, Tea Estates in Eastern Highlands and First National Bank (Yawson 2017). However, as Eskom and South African Airways are on the brink of financial collapse, it would be interesting to find out to what extent *ubuntu* has been implemented in those organisations.

⁷For more information, see Mokone (2018) Ramaphosa Focuses On The Economy: Announces SOE Clean-Up.

Nelson Mandela has been praised for incorporating the principles of *ubuntu* into his leadership style (Rodny-Gumede and Chasi 2017). At Nelson Mandela's memorial, former American president, Barack Obama, stated that Mandela had demonstrated the values of *ubuntu* through his recognition of the value of all people (Rodny-Gumede and Chasi 2017).

Malunga (2009, p. 2) specifies that *ubuntu* is made up of five people-centred principles:

- “*Sharing and collective ownership of opportunities*”—this means that people are encouraged to work together in organisations and communities (Malunga 2009). It emphasises a worker-centred approach as opposed to solely focusing on the leader (Msila 2015);
- “*Responsibilities and challenges*”—in many organisations there is conflict because leaders and followers blame one another when things go wrong, thereby relinquishing their responsibilities. *Ubuntu* promotes taking collective responsibility which is important for the success of an organisation (Malunga 2009);
- “*Importance of people and relationships over things*”—*ubuntu* supports “servant” leadership. This notion implies that true African leaders serve their followers; thus they put their followers’ interests first, before their own interests (Msila 2015). Followers are more motivated to contribute to an organisation if they feel that they are valued (Mangaliso and Damane 2001);
- “*Participatory leadership*”—although African leadership is widely regarded as being autocratic, *ubuntu* leadership is based on participation, with leaders gaining the trust and respect of followers through accountable and selfless behaviour (Malunga 2009);
- “*Decision-making, loyalty and reconciliation as a goal of conflict management*”—this refers to collective decision-making promoted by leaders (Msila 2015). *Ubuntu* encourages discernment when making decisions, which should be achieved through consensus and inclusivity. Although this may be perceived as delaying action in organisations, it secures both leaders’ and followers’ long-term commitment to a goal (Mangaliso and Damane 2001).

Ubuntu African philosophy can make an important theoretical contribution to the ethics in management “because it correctly understands that we are truly human only in community with other persons” (Lutz 2009, p. 314). Galperin and Alamuri (2017) confirm the value of *ubuntu* and suggest that it can be included in leadership practices outside the African continent.

There are several criticisms of *ubuntu*. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017) caution that implementing *ubuntu* can be problematic. West (2014) and Yawson (2017) argue that to date, there is scant empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of *ubuntu*. Advocates of *ubuntu* have been accused of commodifying the concept and using it to stereotype individuals (Yawson 2017). West (2014) contends that it is merely an assumption that African people practise and uphold *ubuntu* values. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013, p. 202) argue that *ubuntu* is an “Africanist agenda” which is being propagated by the African elite. They claim it has largely failed to serve the collective and there are very few individuals who actually practise it.

4 Leadership Theories

4.1 Introduction

Authentic, servant, spiritual and transformational leadership theories are situated within the spiritual paradigm and differ from classical leadership theories. These theories share similarities insofar as they emphasise personal value, transparency and service to others, taking personal responsibility, self-awareness and personal development (Kakabadse et al. 2002). Nkomo (2011) points out that Nelson Mandela is associated with both servant leadership and transformational leadership. On the other hand, Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Nelson Mandela as president, was perceived as an inflexible leader, as portrayed in the book *Bad Leadership* by Barbara Kellerman (Nkomo 2011).

4.2 Authentic Leadership

In 2003 Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Avolio et al. (2004) developed authentic leadership theory. Luthans and Avolio (2003, p. 243) claim that authentic leadership is derived from “positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context.” This leads to increased “self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviours” by leaders and followers and promotes personal development. Authentic leaders are those individuals who are characterised by self-acceptance, being true to who they are (Klenke 2007) and “owning” their personal experiences (Avolio and Gardner 2005).

Authentic leadership has gained prominence due to its emphasis on leaders who are transparent and have a strong ethical dimension (Dhiman 2017). Authentic leaders are described as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge and strengths” (Avolio et al. 2004, p. 4). George (2003) argues that business journalists, the media and Hollywood have placed strongly ego-driven leaders on a pedestal and celebrate such personalities. However, it is precisely this type of leader who is at the centre of the leadership crisis in the world (George 2003).

Authentic leadership is seen as being closely associated with transformational leadership (Dhiman 2017) and servant leadership. Authentic leaders have a strong inclination to serve others (George 2003). In addition to qualities of the mind, authentic leaders have “qualities of the heart” such as compassion for others and passion for what they do (George 2003). Authentic leaders are regarded as positive examples and models by those who follow them because they behave with integrity, are deeply committed to ethical values and promote a conducive organisational climate (Klenke 2007). When making decisions, authentic leaders are able to clearly discern right from wrong as they are guided by their core values (George 2003).

Avolio and Gardner (2005) acknowledge that there is a lack of consensus about how to measure the effectiveness of authentic leadership. Fry and Whittington (2005) warn against the negative consequences of leaders practising authentic leadership when they are driven by self-interest and consequently behave true to who they are.

4.3 *Servant Leadership*

In 1970 Robert Greenleaf, a retired American management executive, put forward the idea of servant leadership, which he believed was lacking in organisations (Greenleaf and Spears 1998). Greenleaf maintained that leadership should prioritise serving others (this includes an organisation's workers and customers as well as the broader community) instead of simply serving one's own personal needs (Greenleaf 1970).

Servant leaders are motivated by their personal belief that they are servants first and leaders second (Sendjaya and Pekerti 2010). Such leaders thus serve their "followers and the organization" (Winston and Fields 2015, p. 415). Servant leadership does not favour any particular supervision style. Instead, it stems from a personal conviction to serve others when there is a need (Sendjaya and Pekerti 2010). Strong personal values are at the core of servant leaders (Russell 2001) and define their moral thinking, leadership approach and ethical behaviour. These qualities appeal to followers and draw them to such leaders (Liden et al. 2014). Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) add that servant leadership reflects moral accountability and the ability to discern right from wrong.

Liden et al. (2014) state that due to their respect and admiration for servant leaders, followers imitate their leaders' behaviour. Such leaders are regarded as role models who guide their followers in determining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Jaramillo et al. 2015). According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant leaders enable, inspire and develop their followers; they demonstrate humility, they are authentic and have a strong moral compass. Such leaders display empathy in providing direction to their followers and have a stewardship (focus on service to others instead of self-interest). Servant leaders thus prioritise their employees' wants and well-being ahead of organisational goals and interests (Jaramillo et al. 2015).

Larry Spears from the Greenleaf Center introduced the ten qualities of a servant leader: being a good listener, empathizing with other people, the ability to heal oneself and others by developing good relationships, self-awareness, being able to persuade others instead of coercing them into doing something, conceptual thinking abilities, having foresight and intuition, stewardship, committed to advancing followers and a willingness to building community (Spears 2010). Servant leadership thus encourages a serving culture in organisations characterised by a common understanding that others' needs should be put first before one's own needs (Liden et al. 2014). The success of servant leadership is therefore largely dependent on the personal values of individuals (Russell 2001).

There is no commonly accepted definition or a specific theory of servant leadership (van Dierendonck 2011). Winston and Fields (2015) note that there are 28 different

dimensions that describe servant leadership and there is very little guidance as to applying such principles in practice. It is also not made explicit whether all 28 dimensions are of equal importance (Winston and Fields 2015).

4.4 Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leadership theory was developed in 2003 by Fry. It refers to “the values, attitudes and behaviours that one must adopt in intrinsically motivating oneself and others so that both have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership—i.e. they experience meaning in their lives, have a sense of making a difference, and feel understood and appreciated” (Fry et al. 2005, p. 836). Reave (2005) adds that spiritual leaders believe in fair play, show respect for others’ values, are concerned about others, are good listeners, recognise contributions made by others and are reflective and introspective. Benefiel (2005) argues that one of the major shortcomings in organisations today is that they lack a spiritual foundation.

In leadership, character is important (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). Spiritual leaders are often referred to as moral leaders (Kakabadse et al. 2002). Moral leaders refuse to co-operate or work in an environment where their core values are compromised (Kakabadse et al. 2002). A spiritual leader’s personal values, beliefs, actions and vision influence the behaviour and moral code in an organisation (Banerji and Krishnan 2000). Duthely (2017) argues that spiritual leadership can thus contribute to promoting positive practices and ethical behaviour in the workplace. Fairholm (1996) explains that spiritual leaders do not manipulate their followers into achieving desired goals; instead they energise and transform them. He goes on to say that unlike other leadership models which emphasise self-interest, personal power, materialism and prestige, spiritual leadership is a departure from values characterised by self-interest.

Spiritual leadership theory is well researched in comparison to other leadership approaches and includes explicit guidance on the higher order needs and cultural and organisational qualities of both spiritual leaders and followers. However, Benefiel (2005) notes that although many leadership scholars have a sound knowledge of leadership theory, they have a limited understanding of the literature of spirituality. Krishnakumar et al. (2015) caution against the negative aspects of workplace spirituality whereby leaders develop a cult-like following and manipulate their followers.

4.5 Transformational Leadership

In 1978 James MacGregor Burns, a leadership expert, historian and political scientist, wrote a book entitled *Leadership*. This work explores both transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Transactional leadership, he argues, refers to leaders whose relationship with their followers is based on barter and agreements. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) note that transactional leadership is founded on self-

interest where followers are either rewarded or penalised depending on their performance (Bass and Avolio 1994). Transformational leadership, on the other hand, extends beyond transactional leadership (Bass and Avolio 1994).

Burn's work on transformational leadership was further developed by Bernard Bass in 1985 in his book entitled *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. Bass argues that values are at the core of transformational leadership (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999) and transformational leaders encourage their followers to focus on the collective needs rather than on their own self-interest (Bass 1990). Yukl (1999) adds that the respect, trust, admiration and loyalty engendered by transformational leaders motivates their followers to deliver more than is usually required.

Bass (1990) identified four characteristics of a transformational leader, namely, personal charisma, the capacity to inspire and motivate followers, encourages problem solving and is personally attentive to employees. Idealised influence is associated with charismatic leaders who are powerful, influential and trusted by their followers (Bass 1990). However, charisma can equally have a negative connotation when leaders become self-absorbed, egotistical, manipulative and distrustful (Parry and Proctor-Thomson 2002). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) believe that transformational leaders lead by example and their followers copy their behaviour (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). Sinek (2017) in *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, emphasises that leaders recognise the value of their employees, put the interests of their employees first and lead their employees into an unfamiliar situation.

Burns (1978, p. 20) asserts that transformational leadership motivates and uplifts followers and is "moral [insofar as] it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both the leader and the led." Leaders become transformational when they are guided by a moral compass (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999) and encourage that which is "right, good, important and beautiful" (Bass 1998, p. 171). Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002) emphasise that although there is a conceptual relationship in literature between transformational leadership and ethics, justice and integrity, there is scant empirical evidence in this regard.

Yukl (1999) points out that there are many positives regarding transformational leadership. Studies conducted by Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam in 1996 and Bass in 1998 provide evidence that transformational leadership is positively correlated with motivation, performance and follower satisfaction (Yukl 1999). Jamaludin et al. (2011) add that transformational leadership results in higher levels of productivity, staff morale and job satisfaction. It is also strengthens commitment to the organisation and promotes good citizenship behaviour.

The weakness of transformational theory, however, is that it can lead to followers over-identifying with transformational leaders and becoming too dependent on them (Yukl 1999). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999, p. 208) also caution that "pseudo-transformational leadership" may result in the abuse of power (especially in politics) as it lacks the checks and balances associated with genuine transactional leadership.

5 Conclusion

This chapter explored leadership in the South African context with specific reference to the Afrocentric leadership style known as *ubuntu*. Four leadership theories in the spiritual paradigm were presented, namely, authentic, servant, spiritual and transformational leadership.

In light of the limited information available on *ubuntu* leadership in the South African context and beyond, it is recommended that further research be undertaken in this regard. Research should also be undertaken on blending Afrocentric and Eurocentric leadership styles in order to identify how this combined leadership approach can be implemented in South Africa.⁸

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