

# Reading 6

## The spirit of African management

L. Mbigi

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Lovemore Mbigi is a business consultant with a particular interest in how African traditional thinking can assist in developing more humane and efficient organizations in Africa. Mbigi argues – like many contemporary management writers – that Western leadership and management practices are often too focused on organizational efficiency, and neglect the feelings and desires of the people who work in the organization. Mbigi argues that the strengths of the scientific and rational approach should be integrated with African traditional thinking in order to accommodate and use these often irrational desires and behaviours to the end of better production.

As you read, note how similar aspects of Mbigi's thinking are to:

- Davidoff's and Lazarus' views on leadership (Reading 8);
  - Schofield's notion of schools as communities (Reading 13).
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### Notes

### Introduction: drawing management ideas from African tradition

The first lesson that I have learned as an African manager is the severe limitations of conventional management theories in managing in an unstable environment undergoing rapid change. (...) The African challenge is to *synthesize* different tribal, racial, economic, social, political and cultural values; synthesizing *polarities* of *reality and stability*, on the one hand, and those of *vision and instability* on the other. (...)

In my response to this challenge, I found (...) I had to rely more and more heavily on indigenous African wisdom and leadership techniques. As a boy, I was sent to the rural areas to be a guide to my grandmother who was a spiritual leader. She was a medium of the spirit of Dembetembe,

### Reading

**synthesize:** to combine into something new  
**polarities:** opposites

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*This edited excerpt is taken from Christie, Lessem and Mbigi. 1994. African Management: Philosophies, Concepts and Applications. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.*

**entrepreneurs:** people who show initiative in seizing an opportunity to develop a business enterprise

which is regarded as being responsible for the destiny of the Vahera people. At her feet I received first-class education in tribal history, religion, politics and literature as well as solid education in morality, tribal custom and leadership. (...) It was ironic that when I went into the business world as a salesman and later an executive, I found myself relying heavily on my tribal education rather than on my Western education.

I had received extensive training in *entrepreneurship* as a child when I learnt to herd cattle and hunt. In my culture, hunting is a way of training and identifying entrepreneurs in that it tests courage, persistence and endurance. (...) People possessing the *spirit of the hunter* are expected to be enterprising, restless, enduring and innovative. They are supposed to draw heavily on the traditions of hunters by having native shrewdness, emotional resilience, persistence, hunch, instinct, an eye for chance, enthusiasm, the capacity to work hard, to take risks and to improvise. There is little difference between the feudal African hunter and the modern entrepreneur. (...)

In the African Shona tradition, people hold frequent celebrations in honour of the hunter to acknowledge and encourage further achievements. During these all-night renewal ceremonies – sometimes called the *pungwe* – the village meets for spiritual celebration and renewal through singing and dancing. Everyone who is present participates, irrespective of status, class, gender and relationship. A spirit of togetherness predominates in these ceremonies. The dancing, singing, drinking and eating is punctuated by moral instructions from the mediums and elders.

(...) The missionaries adopted the *pungwe* as a major evangelizing technique. During the Zimbabwean war of liberation, the freedom fighters used it extensively as a vehicle for political consciousness and political education. The liberation *pungwes* resembled the traditional renewal ceremonies in that singing, dancing and slogan-shouting by everyone present were the main ways of tapping into the emotional, social, psychic and spiritual resources of the organization. They were also seen as a major vehicle for maintaining the morale of the revolutionary cadres and the peasants in sustaining the liberation struggle. (...)

## The problem: turning around a company in trouble

When I joined Eastern Highlands Tea Estates, the company's financial and industrial relations situations were precarious. (...) There had been at least three riotous strikes, morale was low and there was a crisis of expectations on the part of the workers. (...) Relations with the surrounding peasant community were strained and at times confrontational. The management challenge was very clear: how to reconcile the *workers' vision of prosperity* on the one hand, and the *company's realistic limitations* on the other. (...)

Management's response was to dismiss the workers' dreams as impractical and replace them with a more rational, informed and practical *vision*. But workers resisted management's practicality. (...)

When I joined Eastern Highlands, the company's vision document and strategic plan weren't driving company strategy; the daily management practices were. Most of the executives could not remember the (...) strategic plan. The personnel manager attempted to install rational management systems such as job descriptions, job evaluations, disciplinary codes and grievance procedures. He also tried to make sure that the workers were aware of the practical limitations and realities of the company. There was no place for dreams and primitive tribal systems in his management approach. (...) He met resistance, not only from the workers, but more so from his white colleagues. (...)

This was because his focus was on *strategy formulation* while the significance of *emergent strategy* was ignored. The challenge of an African manager is not only to formulate strategy but, more so, to recognize the emerging reality patterns. In the rapidly changing South Africa, the *crafting* of strategy is more important than *formulating* strategy. The Southern African manager has the task of conceptualizing, synthesizing and articulating the emerging strategic reality patterns that evolve from the synthesis of planned strategy and the reality limitations.

(...) The management challenge is that of evolving management practices and knowledge developed elsewhere in the world, to suit the African situation. Effective contextualization can only take place if the African managers are willing to go back into their past and come back with answers to present problems. As Southern African managers, we need to understand our dual cultural heritage, and honour and celebrate our achievements so far. (...)

## **Solutions: drawing on African tradition to reconcile business priorities and communal beliefs**

### ***Using the pungwe to open up communication***

It was clear to me that the conventional management techniques I had learnt at university were inadequate in meeting the management challenges that I faced. (...) I started to adopt traditional management practices, values and philosophies, consciously integrating them with Western management techniques and values. I adopted the traditional *pungwe* as a management innovation, as a major forum for communicating my strategic *vision*, as well as for implementation. I didn't try to make the workers practical. Based on my own experience and the encouragement I got from my grandmother, I have learnt not to discount anyone's dreams, but to encourage people to pursue

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these, no matter how irrational they may appear. (...) In so doing, I was able to tap into this and harness its energy into a powerful transforming force.

The *pungwe* open-air sessions were effective in raising business awareness. Their major feature was that there was full participation of every worker present, and the dialogue was critical of the status quo, being emotional and political in content. (...) During the sessions, anyone could take on the leadership role. Formal leadership had a ceremonial role. The sessions were very effective in the creation and communication of a gripping corporate vision. The *pungwe* sessions improved morale and were critical in creating a new spirit in the company. (...) There was a major shift in industrial relations from confrontation to co-operation. (...) The *pungwe* proved to be a major strategic innovation. The junior managers and supervisors went on to incorporate them into their management practices. They held regular open-air meetings in their sections. (...)

Leadership had become an oral culture for me. The songs became more production-oriented, the grass-roots mobilizers became more articulate, the slogans became more captivating and the thundering of African drums became louder. So the strategic vision became more dynamic and clear. (...) Informal networks became thicker, and as important as the formal relationships.

The transformation of the company was underway. It could not be ordered by formal edicts. It was a process which relied heavily on powerful emotions, hopes, vision and multiple leadership roles. ***Indeed, the transformation of a company is driven by a powerful vision. Rational management systems only assist.*** It is the spirit of the organization, drawn from its historic past, but containing solutions to present problems and future hopes, which is fundamental to transformation. (...)

### ***Establishing intimate relationships***

To prevent the alienation and exclusive arrangements created by contractual relationships, we emphasized the maintenance of primary relationships and eyeball contact with the workers. We introduced briefing groups. Every manager would brief those below him, up to the frontline supervisor, who would frequently brief his workers. The discussions would centre on establishing and reviewing targets as well as costs. This was done regularly, and at times daily, during the peak seasons. We also established a production committee to deal with production problems. We had a workers' council consisting of both managers and workers to deal with industrial relations matters, as well as a workers' committee consisting of worker representatives only.

The development of this web of intimate primary relationships helped to create a collaborative and caring atmosphere. This helped to synthesize different cultural values. Intimate relationships empower people to freedom and action, instead of analysis and paralysis. The intimate rela-

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tionships rest on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals and management processes. These relationships enable people to find meaning and satisfaction in their work; they have the capacity to *host* an unusual person or ideas.

**host:** accept

We were able to develop people, products, social structures and a commercial organization by synthesizing knowledge and insight from African tradition – with its emphasis on harmony and community care – with Western values of efficiency and enterprise. This enabled us to adapt to the challenges of our environment through the emphasis on organizational harmony, collaboration and business interdependence. (...)

### ***Releasing a productive spirit***

(...) Shona society has a production festival called *mukwerera*. It is an event designed to celebrate past agricultural achievement as well as plan for the coming season. The ceremony is presided over by a rainmaker. I introduced the festival at Eastern Highlands as a major strategic ceremony and invited chiefs, traditional healers, the mediums and the rainmakers, African independent church leaders, political and government leaders, as well as all managers, workers, their families and the peasants in the nearby feudal economy to attend. The rituals would be carried out by either the chief or the rainmaker, as in the true African tradition. The festival was an all-day, open-air meeting, in a mass rally style, where workers sang traditional folk and ceremonial songs. The songs were adapted to our chosen company strategic themes at the initiative of the workers.

During the festival I would go over the company's strategic objectives and each pause would be punctuated by songs and slogans, designed to communicate and capture the company's vision. (...) The ceremony represented a synthesis of Western values of enterprise and African visionary spirit. The result was the harnessing of the company's energy into a dynamic force to translate the strategic vision and objectives into reality ... it became a living document. During this ceremony, the best workers were honoured – they were called 'production heroes'. The best department and estates were also honoured, while the general manager and I would go through the company's performance during the year and the objectives for the next year.

The production festival ritual helped us to unite diverse tribal and racial cultural values, as well as synthesizing the feudal peasant economy and the modern cash economy. This has enabled Eastern Highlands to tap into the emotional, spiritual, cultural and social resources of the members of the company. The high expectations and hopes of the workers (...) must not be regarded as a crisis, but as an opportunity for transformation. (...)

### ***Integrating tribal leadership and modern management***

I started to use African tribal leadership courses for workers' committees, supervisors and managers. I would use parables and African proverbs, as well as traditional healers, folk singers, market women and traditional peasant farmers as role models for inspiring and empowering leadership. I integrated this ancient leadership wisdom with scientific management concepts (...).

For example, I applied simple traditional techniques, used by my grandmother in educating the young, to run a pre-school education leadership programme. The curriculum was based on African playground culture, themes, folk songs and story-telling. I preferred the illiterate women to be the teachers and trained them over a month, using action-learning techniques. The teachers have been very effective, and my own daughter is a graduate of these pre-schools. The major managerial task is to manage their evolution by interrelating ancient tribal wisdom with scientific techniques of developmental psychology. (...)

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### **Integrating company concerns with those of the local community**

#### ***Creating psychic communities***

The resident population of Eastern Highlands is over 20 000 people. Instead of having large urban compounds plagued by alienation and violence (partly due to anonymity), we divided the residential areas into small self-contained and semi-autonomous villages. The idea was to create a true African tribal village in geographical, psychic and physical terms. Despite their smallness, the villages still had a fair amount of the urban problems of thuggery and vandalism. It occurred to me that the social structures and institutions that are the basis of the village relationships were missing.

I decided to create those social institutions that govern a traditional village. The common element in all the institutions was participative democracy and consensus decision-making. Service and leadership were voluntary and unpaid, just like in the traditional village. The idea was to convert the physical village into ***psychic communities***. We created a village assembly for every village to deal with the general welfare of the village. This became the supreme board, and its members were chosen by popular vote. Under it we had various self-governing committees, each with a single focus. For example, we had an education committee to deal with educational matters, and a women's council to deal with women's issues – particularly the improvement of women's education, social and economic status. We had folk choirs to recreate the company's collective experience into songs and slogans. There was a welfare com-

mittee to deal with welfare issues. There was a village court, with the blessing of the Ministry of Justice to deal with civil cases. The health and safety committee dealt with occupational safety matters and the preventative health of the village. We had voluntary 'barefoot' doctors – that is, voluntary village health workers. These committees were self-governed and would seek advice from the personnel function.

I began a programme called '*Dandaro*' (renewal). This involved eyeball to eyeball discussions, as well as the training of these communities. It was a two-way educational process. We focused on the development of people, company, products, vision, ideas, relationships, communities, institutions, and the nation. The primary thrust was the development of harmony through the creation of collaborative relationships based on respect, human dignity and trust. (...)

### ***Using the village model to restructure the company***

After the initial success of the village model in managing the compounds, we decided to integrate it with the conventional Western management systems. We developed effective consensus management systems through democracy, and through human care of the African traditional village. We did not destroy the existing formal structures, but retained them to provide form and control. We 'villagized' the organization into small semi-autonomous units and created a thick network of informal relationships that cut across the formal structures and relationships, to provide the life and action that is so vital to strategy implementation. My vision was to transform the company from a mere economic entity based on exclusive relationships into an *enterprising community* with inclusive relationships based on the trust and intimacy of an African village.

Three of the key elements in the art of working together involve how to deal with change, how to deal with conflict and how to realize our potential. A legal contract always breaks down under the inevitable duress of conflict and change. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said this about legalistic relationships:

*A society based on the letter of the law and never reaching any higher, fails to take advantage of the full range of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relationships, this creates an atmosphere of spiritual mediocrity that paralyzes men's noblest impulses. After a certain level of the problem has been reached, legalistic thinking induces paralysis, it prevents one from seeing the scale and meaning of events.*

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**legalistic:** bound by strictly legal considerations only, without considering broader human (moral or emotional) values or concerns

**mediocrity:** an avoidance of what is wrong that leads to dull, middle-of-the-road judgments and actions

## Conclusion

First, we learnt that management cannot be fully understood in terms of practical techniques alone. There is a need to understand the abstract, theoretical and philosophical aspects that have been neglected in the development of management thought. If management is to come of age, it has to give the abstract and philosophical aspects the serious attention they deserve. In fact, the development of the new sciences and fully fledged professions have shown that the depth of reality can only be captured by going beyond the concrete into the abstract, theoretical and philosophical world. (...) It is my contention and experience that managers need a strong value base and philosophical base as a foundation of practice. (...) Complete reality and the essence of human experience can only be captured by going beyond the practical and functional, and by entering into the abstract world of *ethics* and *values* – in short, into the world of philosophy and poetry. (...)

Secondly, the rapid pace of change makes the conventional management approach inadequate and calls for other management paradigms. African traditional practices and wisdom need to become the basis for management and institutional innovation. The management challenges in Africa rest in a set of polarities: stability versus chaos; harmony versus conflict; reality versus vision; feudalism versus modernity; freedom versus control; and diversity versus integration. As African managers, we need to be able to balance and reconcile these opposites. (...)

I have observed Lessem's four management approaches (1989) as a response to these challenges. The instinctive *primal management domain* draws on the traditions and rituals of ancient African hunters. The *rational conventional management domain* relies on the scientific heritage of the West. *Developmental management* draws its inspiration from the harmony, adaptability and care of the ancient African tribal village. The *visionary 'inspirational', metaphysical* domain of management celebrates both the spirit of ancient wisdom and the courage and dreams of modern science.

Of all the four approaches, I find visionary management to be the most appropriate in meeting African management challenges. It is capable of synthesizing all the polarities. It can integrate ancient wisdom of the past with the modern science of the present, as well as reality and vision. It turns them into the dynamic energy which is essential for undertaking the task of transformation required, if Africa is to catch up with the rest of the world. (...)

Finally, the traditional African community is characterized by an organic structure in which primary and informal relationships are of great significance, as well as formal relationships. In traditional African communities, ceremonies, rituals and symbols are of importance. These key features have to be expressed in the organizational forms that are being evolved in Africa. The new organizational forms in Southern Africa need

to gravitate towards *organic* structural designs rather than *mechanistic* bureaucratic designs. In essence, the company in Southern Africa has to be more than a mere economic unit and become a *thriving, enterprising community as in the traditional African community*. (...)

## References

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