

African leadership brings vision, energy and hope

A survey of senior management in South Africa finds diversity and reinvention at the core of executive mindsets.



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For examples of courageous, radical and optimistic leadership, look no further than South Africa. A new collaborative study between IESE and Henley Business School Africa's Henley Centre for Leadership Africa examined the dynamics of successful top management teams

and found the best had a keen sense of optimism coupled with a desire to reinvent the role of top management for a new generation.

IESE's [Anneloes Raes](#) and coauthors Bernd Vogel, Janet Brumme, Brian Mhlanga and Vickey De Villiers from Henley Business School Africa set out to learn from organizations that are in some way outstanding and could be role models for positive, optimistic and successful leadership in South Africa and beyond.

Building momentum

The [study](#) aimed to understand positive and negative dynamics in senior teams in context, to assess the range of contributions team members make toward the success of the company, and to evaluate how team members personally felt about their roles in senior management.

“Vision” was a recurring theme among the senior management teams interviewed, with many participants saying their purpose was to frame the business vision.

Among them were Rahul Jain and Andreas Demleitner, who met in South Africa during a summer internship as part of their IESE MBA. They now run [Peach Payments](#), an electronic payment solutions provider based in Cape Town. In fact, [Jain was named Most Innovative Entrepreneur as part of IESE's 40under40 awards](#).

“Our innovation was in reimagining how things might work differently in African markets,” says Jain, who added that he could see their payment tool becoming as fundamental in African businesses as basic infrastructure such as roads.

Participants also saw themselves as effecting large-scale cultural change, including impacting youth employment in key areas. They perceived senior management teams as buzzing, having flow and showing morale with a sense of community.

Growing pains — a good problem to have

One of the biggest difficulties the surveyed companies faced in 2024 was how to manage an environment of high-paced growth.

“There are so many directions a company can choose to take, so many possible paths, but if it's growing a lot, you have to be really careful about how you prioritize your time,” says Raes, reflecting on the teams she observed.

Among the paths they prioritized were:

- **People time.** Investing time in relationship maintenance, from training and coaching to meetings.
- **International vs. local.** When companies grew internationally, decision-making became multilayered and often had to take international structures into account, as well as country-specific challenges relating to infrastructure, laws and business customs.
- **Positive mindset.** Maintaining an anything-is-possible worldview, which translates into optimism, energy and a strong sense of momentum on the ground.
- **Reinventing the role of senior management.** Increased diversity of profiles and ages contributed dynamism to teams' vision and drive.

Executives admitted to some negatives in their higher leadership journeys, citing the unrelenting pace, intensity and pressure of work, as well as juggling personal and professional responsibilities and the double-edged sword of accountability.

Overall, however, they spoke in terms of benefits. Participants found their work fulfilling and emotionally rewarding and highlighted that being part of a community of professionals could be energizing, exciting and satisfying. They also felt it contributed to strong personal growth and development as a human being beyond business.

In this vein, participants also spoke of how their work grew their appetite for social responsibility and impact.

READ: [Map your productive organizational energy](#), also by IESE's Anneloes Raes and Bernd Vogel of Henley Business School.



Anneloes Raes

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