

What kind of leader will thrive in Africa?

These are the leadership qualities needed to succeed in the sociocultural context of sub-Saharan Africa.



January 1, 2015

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An expatriate CEO sent from head office in London to an underperforming subsidiary in Nigeria found the situation there was far worse than imagined. He called an urgent meeting with all regional staff to highlight the problems as he saw them. Of the 250 staff, only 25 showed up. This, he shouted, was proof of their slack attitude toward work, and he stormed out.

This dramatic act by the CEO sent the desired shockwaves through the company. But was it effective?

As corporate leaders increasingly find themselves working with diverse teams across borders, understanding the local context is crucial. Nowhere is this truer than in Africa, a vast continent with immense social, economic and cultural differences.

As Africa attracts greater interest and attention from multinationals, and as African companies expand their operations throughout the continent, their ability to understand and appreciate the distinct values, behavior, attitudes and styles of local contexts becomes decisive for achieving outstanding performance.

Allied to this is a growing recognition that successful leadership today requires the ability to inspire others. Inspired employees are more engaged in their work, they share a sense of ownership, they go above and beyond the call of duty, and they are more likely to carry out their assignments not because they have to, but because they want to. In short, they feel a strong sense of corporate citizenship.

To be this kind of inspirational leader entails, again, a deep understanding and appreciation of what local people consider inspiring.

This article discusses the context-specific factors that any leader must take into account when managing people and doing business in Africa, mainly sub-Saharan Africa and in particular, Nigeria, the context that I know best as director of the Center for Research in Leadership and Ethics at [Lagos Business School](#).

I draw on several studies I have done, including a comparison of work attitudes and norms between Nigeria and the United States, and research on the values and aspirations of different generations in the Nigerian workplace, which are contained in [Change Leadership in Developing Countries](#) (Routledge, 2014).

First, I will describe the general sociocultural context of sub-Saharan Africa. Then, I will highlight the appropriate leadership qualities, behavior, values and attributes that are needed to succeed in this context.

Understanding sociocultural realities in Africa

Africa is certainly rising. In 2014, General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt announced a \$2 billion investment in African infrastructure, energy and skills over the next five years. Other

corporations are following suit. With growth rates averaging 5% over the past decade, Africa has become an attractive destination, with China being a prime investor.

Alongside this, a number of African businesses are internationalizing their operations, with MTN Group (South Africa), Computer Warehouse Group (Nigeria), Guaranty Trust Bank (Nigeria), Standard Bank (South Africa) and Equity Bank (Kenya) just a few of those that have opened subsidiaries in other African countries.

However, executives operating in Africa need to get behind the growth statistics. The opportunities may be huge, but so are the management challenges.

Execution takes time — perhaps more time than in other places to achieve the desired results — which is why a manager coming into this context needs to get to grips with several important on-the-ground realities.

The following factors pervade all aspects of labor relations, people management and talent development, and will condition one's ability to get things done through and with other people — the very essence of leadership. Let's consider each in turn.

The full article is published in [IESE Insight 24 \(Q1 2015\)](#).

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