

**THE NEED FOR AN AFROCENTRIC MANAGEMENT APPROACH
AND WITHIN IT A SOUTH AFRICA-BASED MANAGEMENT
APPROACH
20 NOVEMBER 1992**

This theme touches the central nerve of our national existence, in fact more, it raises fundamental issues about our role as a geo-economic entity in the world socio-economic order. During the past decade or so there has been much talk about the economic triad, namely America, the Pacific Rim (Japan) and Europe. In such crucial debates, Africa is almost invariably off screen – the entire continent does not feature. The argument being that what contribution the continent makes in the world economy is so miniscule as to be negligible.

Given this background, can a case be argued for an Afrocentric management approach? The answer is the philosophical yes and no. No, because there is no real management track record to blow our trumpet about. Tanzania's ujamaa and Zambia's African Humanism have delivered very little, ostensibly because of the socialist embroidery of these concepts. Yes, because the continent's economic order has a date with destiny. Africa is essentially an underdeveloped geo-economic, socio-political entity with potential. For that potential to come to reality latent resources, in particular human resources, need to be managed. At core, economic development is a function of how people relate to another, how they organise themselves into productive forces. I want to argue that there are tendencies with a people which if appropriately directed, make for better organisational behaviour with attendant higher productivity than an imposed organisational system.

The case for Afrocentricity is largely to do with usage of home base in addressing challenges, including the economic challenge. It is to do with points of departure and modes of relating. Europeans would be crazy to behave, for instance as Africans would traditionally do; Americans and Japanese would come across as both funny and phoney if they exchanged traditional cultural roles between themselves. Similarly Africans, in our particular case, South Africans, had better stop behaving as though they were an outpost of Europe. We have to know ourselves and begin to use our existential reality as a departure point.

Afrocentricity is about Africans putting Africa at the centre of their existence and consciousness. It is about Africans anchoring themselves in their own continent; its history, traditions, cultures, mythology, creative motif, ethos and value systems exemplifying the African collective will. It is both theory and practise. In its theoretical aspect it entails interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the periphery of the European or so-called Western experience. In its practical implications, Afrocentricity entails authentic Africa-based behaviour in the socio-cultural, economic and political arenas.

Afrocentricity is neither racist nor anti-anybody. It accords Africans their rightful place in the universe. It takes pride in the African identity without denigrating others. It acknowledges diversity as much as it abhors any notions of racial superiority.

Afrocentricity is not an attempt to impose an African worldview upon others, nor is it an

attempt to develop black supremacy. On the contrary, Afrocentricity proposes that people of African descent or cultural orientation anchor their view and evaluation of the world within their own historical and ontological experiences. It is a bold assertion of the essence of Africa from its own native soil.

Having said that, Afrocentricity remains a broad concept, a continent-wide challenge with attendant vexing questions: Is the continent sufficiently culturally homogeneous from Cape to Cairo, East to West Africa? Are there values that are characteristically African, transcending African boundaries? Of what relevance are these to economic development and business management in particular?

These and related questions have to be addressed with scholarly rigour and discipline before we can talk with confidence and pride about an Afrocentric management approach. Intimidated by the daunting nature of this task I chose to confine my topic to South Africa and to address the challenge from the relatively narrower base: The need for a South Africa-based management approach.

The South Africa-centred perspective on management as envisaged here is intended to break new ground to provide an important additive in the essential process of refocusing, formulating and fine-tuning an Afrocentric approach to an application of management. It is a challenge to corporate South Africa to reorganise the conceptual baskets containing our knowledge about people and their predisposition to work and productivity.

The business world as currently conceptualised and structured in most South African corporations is generally cast in a Eurocentric mould. Little or no account is taken of what contribution indigenous world-views can make for the better shaping of the world of work.

For instance the Eurocentric view arrogantly posits that hard work and diligence are a function of the degree to which one has assimilated and espouses the Protestant work ethic. This is an affront to anyone with an African belief system which posits that the indolent in society are such pariahs who do not deserve to get spouses. Preceding lobolo a future son-in-law has to produce intsebenzo, ie. Evidence that he can work and provide for a family. As a general rule most African societies hold industry and diligence in high esteem and view indolence with deep contempt. Following are two premises considered to be sufficiently compelling to serve as pillars for the reconstruction of a South Africa-based approach to management.

PREMISE 1

South Africans have always argued, certainly with good cause in certain aspects but premised on immoral assumptions, that South Africa is unique. That its problems and challenges defy a unified world morality, eg. race, ethnicity, perceived inferiority of blacks in relation to 'white civilisation' which is regarded as superior. Such arguments would discount the whole notion of universal ethical standards. They would also insist that the economic and political solutions urged by the world community are too simplistic and inapplicable to South Africa.

It is true that cultural diversity characterises the multi-cultural mixture of South Africa's population whose value-systems, aspirations, goals and world-views were not immediately

reconcilable. But that does not validate the legal and educational and other inequalities and inequities entrenched in the acts of parliament. South African whites simply have to acknowledge the historical injustices and get on with setting new and enlightened economic and political directions and goals.

NOW TO THE THEME OF MANAGEMENT

To assume and to practice without question management practices of the West is to impose less than optimum solutions on South African management challenges and circumstances. Of necessity it must mean that we are not taking advantage of our potential in terms of issues such as values, aspirations, human resources availability, skills complement and the structure of society in general as well as the economy in particular.

PREMISE 2

A view of history holds that the world progresses by decay and regeneration and that this assumes a cyclic evolution that is described sometimes in generations but more often in civilisations.

Simply put, at one time in history, the Roman civilisation was the centre of the universe, embodying the most advanced military, economic, cultural and political systems and processes of their time.

The same can be said of Europe during the Renaissance period, of North America for much of this century and evidently with a perceptible shift to the Far East.

This can be reduced to a micro level where one can talk of the age of Egypt, Great Britain, Germany, USA, USSR, Japan etc. whereby by and large whether singly or as part of an international axis, these countries have been in the forefront in terms of political, economic or military might. Underlying all this is a system of management and human resource deployment which at any one time is the most efficient and effective for the challenges of the day.

Such advancement has not been achieved by mere emulation of a decaying power, but by an adaptation and improvement of those values, systems and processes that an emerging power found most appropriate and applicable to their circumstances.

The Japan of today amongst the many other things it has done, has not merely emulated the management system and philosophy of the US. It chose those aspects that it found pertinent to their needs and circumstances, modified and adapted them.

With the mere emulation of a current power at its peak comes only the prospect of our ultimately achieving development and proficiency from an alien system that may be on its downward spiral of decay. We would be positioning ourselves for the past and not for the future.

Our prospects of success in the long-term lies in watching what the ascendant nations are doing and building on those by infusing them with our unique requirements and resources.

On the above-going should be predicated the need to develop a South African-based approach to management

TOWARD A SOUTH AFRICA-BASED APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT

There is a body of knowledge on how to manage business developed over the years. Key components of success in enterprise have been identified by among others Richard Tanner Pascal and Anthony G Athos as strategy, structure and systems (the so-called hard variables) as well as style, staff, skills and superordinate goals (the so-called soft variable). Suffice it to state that these are by now taken as given for business to function. What matters and makes a difference is the approach to managing these components within a given culture.

Culture is the enormous and dynamic structure of behaviours, ideas, attitudes, values, habits, beliefs, customs, language, rituals, ceremonies and practices peculiar to a people . The sum-total of these elements provide them with general designs for living and patterns for interpreting reality. We cannot therefore hope to devise an effective management approach for such a people without a profound understanding of their culture. Culture is to humans as water is to the fish.

It is a fallacy to believe that you can impose a business culture on a people and make it work perfectly without taking into account the cultural archetypes of the people in question. Yet corporate South Africa is guilty of just this. Corporate culture as experienced in South Africa today is very Eurocentric. Business practice as currently conceptualised in most South African corporations is generally cast in a Eurocentric mould, worse still, an Anglo-Saxon mould.

Manifestations of this traditional corporate style include decision making that is informed by power relations rather than consensus; fostered adversarial relationships between managers and the managed, buyers and suppliers, whites and blacks, etc. instead of consensual relationships. This stems from the morbid belief that for any organisational structure to function well there must be a counterforce, a form of opposition, which is a counter-productive relic of Anglo-Saxon governmental and organisational systems.

Western managerial designs such as strategy, organisational structure, systems, financial controls and so forth can only function optimally in a conducive environment. It is to that which would make for a conducive environment in South African commerce and industry that we turn our attention.

A new overall concept of business in South Africa is required which will take account of the traditions and culture of the African participants in commerce and industry. To start with we shall call it the Community Concept.

The community concept of business perceives the business organisation as a community to which the individual belongs; not just one with a fixed legal contract but one of which he is a member by choice. This community is built on close interpersonal relationships and group interactions held together by a feeling of security and harmony on the part of all its members. The members submit themselves and their hopes and plans to this community.

The tenets of a community concept of business are essentially humanistic and humane and

should permeate the whole outlook on business methods and practices. It is axiomatic, that a true community has norms, rules and regulations. These rules are strict. But the rules and regulations are those judged necessary to facilitate interpersonal relations and to promote the values and objectives of the community, they are not aimed at preserving the ascendancy of one group in the community over another.

It follows that the rules and regulations must be seen to be fair and reasonable and must be clearly understood by all members.

A community concept requires that management be approachable, not to say over-familiar. After all in African villages the chiefs are highly dignified personalities but yet very approachable. An atmosphere of informality must overhang the chores and procedures of business if employees across the board are to feel a sense of belonging. The managing director who is unable to engage in occasional informal chats along the corridor with the young trainee several rungs below him cannot hope to generate esprit de corps in the organisation. Managers should strive to understand the world-views of those they manage and share the feelings of being human along with them.

In a community there is a free flow of information. Everyone has a right to know what is going on. Each member of the group is a custodian of its secrets. One cannot cultivate a community spirit by withholding information and trying to manipulate facts.

The Community Concept of management has a strong philosophical base in the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a concept that brings to the fore images of supportiveness, co-operation and solidarity, ie. Communalism. It is the basis of a social contract that stems from but transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family to the extended kinship network, the community.

With diligent cultivation it should be extendable to the business corporation. Ubuntu as an orientation to life is opposed to individualism and insensitive competitiveness. Neither is it comfortable with collectivism where the latter stresses the importance of the social unit to the point of depersonalising the individual. At the same time it places great importance on working for the common good, as captured by the expression: 'Ubuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu' (Nguni) 'Motho ke motho ka batho' (Sotho) 'Munhu i munhu hi vanhu' (Tsonga) literally translated: a person is a person through other human beings; or I am because you are, you are because we are.

The Ubuntu philosophy and the community concept of the corporation have significant practical implications for corporate life. Among these are the fact that they provide a cultural hotbed for such important values as creative co-operation, empathetic communication and team work. They provide a basis for what should be corporate culture on African soil. Corporate South Africa would be well-advised to explore them more seriously with a view to develop a composite, more generally accepted art of South African management.

Echoes of observations and beliefs by Ryuzaburo Kaku, chairman of Canon Inc, Japan's high-technology multinational (revenues \$12 billion per annum) suggest important philosophical similarities between the art of Japanese management and the basic tenets of Ubuntu and the community concept of the corporation. In a recent interview with FORBES Publisher Casper W Weinberger, Kaku had the following to say :-

'There are four levels of corporations. The first level is pure capitalism. It is a fine system,

as evident by the recent failure of socialist economies, but it has its weakness too, in the conflict and tension between workers and management’.

‘In the second stage management and labour share a common destiny. This way you remove tension in the relationship. In part, you do this through employee stock ownership but more important is to respect workers as equals. Rather than having one canteen for staff and another for workers, you have one for everyone. When business is bad, rather than laying off workers, management takes pay cuts, perhaps by one half. Management suffers, not the workers’.

‘This is the second stage of development, after pure capitalism. The third stage is a corporation that goes beyond working for its own well-being alone and considers the well-being of the whole community. Many Japanese corporations are committed to the good of the nation. Unfortunately, this creates friction with other nations.’.

‘Now we come to the fourth and last category of corporation, which I think is an ideal. This is a corporation that works for co-existence with the whole of humankind. And that is Canon’s commitment now that we are starting on our second 50 years’.

‘We began the fourth stage three years ago. For the next century or two, nation-states, and perhaps a super sort of national organisation, like the European Community, will be the main actors, but beyond that the world’s going to be one family. Corporations must be in the vanguard of this new concept’.

Significant implications flow from the community concept of management:

Managerial reality is not absolute; rather it is socially and culturally determined. Across all cultures and in all societies human beings coming together to work encounter common problems pertaining to establishing direction, co-ordination, and motivation. The community concept provides a sound basis for team learning and would help to eliminate Eurocentric blind spots occasioned by a preoccupation with individual excellence which often degenerate into reckless individualism within SA corporations

Well cultivated and applied, the community concept of management could help develop a greater sense of oneness within the corporation thereby contributing towards changing the traditional adversarial relationship between managers and the managed into a consensual one

Where the community concept of business management is in place corporate social responsibility programmes should be more natural. Seen in this light, management would appreciate that they ought not to expect anything directly from such social investments; it is corporate contribution to the overall health of society

From Afrocentricity, African Humanism and the community concept of the organisation we can derive the following values of importance to the world of work:

Consensus based decision-making in preference to Western decision-making based on power relations

Collaborative relationships inculcated in the place of fostered adversarial relationships so characteristic of the Western concept of the organisation, eg. the institutionalised conflict

between management and organised labour

Valuing co-operation over competition as entrenched in African cultural archetypes and idiomatic expressions, eg 'Rintiho rinwe a ri nusi hove' Tsonga for 'one finger cannot pick up a grain'

A work ethic based on African cultural archetypes in preference to the Protestant work ethic.

These inter alia would be part of the African contribution to a new approach to management and business leadership.

What appears to be needed then is an eclectic corporate culture that recognises that Europe and other countries have had and will continue to have a lot to offer to the body of knowledge crucial for business and economic development, whilst at the same time fully accepting that there are substantial lessons to be learned from the dynamic evolving South African mode of dealing with the world of work. This should inform our particular approach to managing our enterprises.

In rounding off this section, let's take quick stock of our political economy. Examining the harsh realities of business in South Africa – the mixed character of its different races, ethnic groups and cultures, conflicting economic interests, prejudices dating back to the colonial era, racial conflicts, clashing ideologies – the idea of a community concept of business organisation might seem in many ways idealistic and difficult to practice.

If this is indeed so, it illustrates the great distance that separates many of the corporations in South Africa from the kind of management relationships and practices which I feel can promote true industrial harmony and provide a sound basis for high productivity in a setting such as ours. Viewed in this light diversity presents a daunting challenge but one that must perforce be addressed.