

AFRICAN



WISDOM AT WORK

Bongani Mgyai takes a look at African wisdom.
Does it add value in the workplace?
Must special provision be made for it?

Swaziland is the last absolute monarchy in the world. However, this is by no means the end of traditional rule as a system. Currently in South Africa the Traditional Courts Bill is being promulgated. This bill and the attention it has received signals that a section of the South African public and indeed those in positions of authority still feel there is a place for African traditional rule.

Management practice is mostly based on Western philosophy, but is there room in the workplace for traditional African wisdom?

NOT NECESSARILY ...

Metropolitan Health's human resources manager Nontsasa Makupula agrees but cautions against prescribing the work culture in an organisation. She insists that each company has its own culture made up of European and African, male and female, and different cultural customs.

The employer should sensitise staff to accommodate African values, but those values should be in line with the company's stated values which are, at any rate, crafted in consultation with diverse groups.

"There is no need to push for African values in the workplace. Employment equity and such regulations already deal with this. When employment equity is correctly implemented in companies, the culture in the workplace will change naturally to reflect the people and personalities in that work environment."

Dr Reuel Khoza, chairman of AKA Capital and the Nedbank Group, warns on placing too much confidence in traditional wisdom. He says that in African society too much trust is placed on elders, who might have a limited perspective and less sophisticated knowledge to deal with contemporary challenges.

AND YET ...

Dr Khoza, however, admits there is a benefit in incorporating some of the African ways of doing things. An African approach to leadership seeks to be participative and inclusive to a much greater extent.

In a speech entitled Humanising Capital, Dr Khoza says, "You must confide in and work together with your employees, customers, surrounding communities, NGO activists, the media, government reg-

ulators and foreign interests. The model of the African village chief sitting under the big tree with his advisors and listening to the assembled people is a good one for business. It ensures the legitimacy of subsequent decisions and actions."

Western ideas in the workplace are often based on Maslow's philosophy of self-actualisation – which means the organisation will perform better if individuals can be motivated to aim for their personal best.

Contrary to this, in African society the aim is for a better community which will, in turn, provide a better environment for the individual. This is ubuntu, which is based on the African concept of a person is a person because of others.

Says Prof Marius Ungerer, associate professor in Strategic Management and Management Consulting at the USB: "The roots of humanity come from Africa, and therefore African wisdom will help us to understand people and their organisations. African people's inclusiveness, ability to consult everyone and deep respect for the views of others form part of what African wisdom gives us."

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... wisdom is like a baobab tree – no one individual can embrace it. It requires a diversity of people holding hands to embrace the tree

economy requires of us to not only use the hands and physical labour of people, but to make everyone a thinking part of the organisation.

“The real challenge in the workplace is to mine the wisdom of the people in the organisation to obtain multiple views or gain insight in order to benefit long-term sustainability. Making everybody a thinking part of the organisation has always been part of Africa’s culture.”

While this approach may come across as a time-consuming exercise it is important to understand that sometimes one needs to go slow in order to go fast later. Slowing down in a constructive way to get the input of a wide variety of stakeholders can save you time during the execution phase because people will know what it is about and why things are done in a particular way, says Ungerer.

ALL WORK, NO PLAY?

Chief Jongusapho Bokleni, the Mpondo traditional ruler in Ntlaza village in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, refers to his subjects as abantwana bam, which isiXhosa for my children. This expression might be demeaning and even condescending in Western society, but in Africa it is an affectionate expression by a leader when referring to his constituency.

In modern Western organisations managers often say nonchalantly, “We are not here to be friends; we are here to work”. This draws a surgical line between the demands of work and the social needs of staff.

COMBINING THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Dr Salome Van Coller-Peter, programme head of the USB’s MPhil in Management Coaching degree, is an ambassador for the principle of Ubuntu. She concludes that one cannot exist, manage or lead in a vacuum.

However, this does not imply that she rejects conventional Western wisdom. She would much rather see a combination of the results-orientated Western approach and the human touch that forms the foundation of Africa’s approach to business.

According to Van Coller-Peter, it is mostly the second-generation or third-generation of management coaches who realise the significance of the richness that diversity brings to the workplace in terms of thoughts, alternatives and world views. She states: “African wisdom greatly enhances our decision making.”

Van Coller-Peter elaborates: “We need to allow ourselves to spend time with people with different perspectives or constructs (the lens through which we look). This offers alternative solutions to the challenges we face.”

What often stands in the way of long-lasting and all-embracing solutions is the impatience of some managers for results which, inevitably, leads to making decisions with a short-term focus. Managers who make quick, non-consultative decisions are taking short cuts. “They must realise that those decisions are only valid for people who think alike – and that these decisions will be short-lived,” says Van Coller-Peter.

In her own experience she finds that the world is in love with the principle of African wisdom. This is also illustrated by the numerous requests she receives from coaches globally who want to come to South Africa to gain experience by working with people with different world views.

More and more Americans and Europeans realise they can learn from South Africa’s diversity, she says, adding: “We have come a long way, but we have a longer way to go. A critical part of that journey is to employ people in key decision-making positions who represent the very clientele that we are trying to capture and serve.”

She likes the Somali proverb that says wisdom is like a baobab tree – a tree that no one individual can embrace. It requires a diversity of people holding hands in an effort to embrace the tree, or in this context, the organisation they work for.

The optimal solution would be if companies could combine the action-oriented, timeous responses and decisive implementation of a Western management approach with Africa’s ability to show love and build relationships. That, Van Coller-Peter believes, would result in “the mobilisation of a collective intelligence which will be second to none”. **a**

KARIN SCHEERMBLICKER



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