

8 *Ubuntu as a resource for transformative leadership in southern Africa*

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Overview

Transformative leadership rejects elite dominance in decision-making and politics. It supports people becoming agents regardless of location, socioeconomic or political status, or aptitude; taking responsibility for their wellbeing; and becoming transformative leaders themselves. Ubuntu shares common traits with transformative leadership by embracing social justice, and encouraging leaders who are interconnected with others and avoid negative impacts on other people. Furthermore, consultation and negotiation between individuals and groups at all levels acting in the best interests of others, participatory decision-making, and acting against autocratic censors are some of the elements of ubuntu that resemble transformative leadership. Western-oriented models have influenced approaches to transformative leadership in Africa. A transformative leadership framework, informed by ubuntu, is required to rehumanise all, as it fosters respect for fellow humans, promoting justice and positive relationships; avoiding selfishness, greed, and violence against others; and promoting participatory decision-making.

Introduction

Ubuntu is a broad term for an ethic that stretches across multiple countries, regions, and social/ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a Bantu cultural value system that emphasises humanness and helps people become better people (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Nzimakwe, 2014). While ubuntu has been applied in education, social work, business, political science, and leadership, among other areas (Nzimakwe, 2014), there is renewed interest in the influence of ubuntu on African political leadership. A leader who is inclusive, participative, and non-violent and embraces the more humanistic principles of solidarity, social justice, and *batho pele* (people first) is said to have ubuntu (Breed & Semanya, 2015). This chapter seeks to understand the extent to which ubuntu leadership resembles transformative leadership in the southern African region. Accordingly, the chapter works from the hypothesis that leaders who embed in their outlook attributes such as respect for social justice, human rights, and democracy, among others, can be said to be transformative as well as having ubuntu in the African context.

Southern Africa was chosen as a case study for two major reasons. First, countries in the region share colonial and post-independence experiences, and second, words similar to ubuntu are used in many regional languages to refer to the same concept, namely that ‘a person is a person because of others’ (Breed & Semanya, 2015, p. 5). This maxim connotes that the only way to become human is to rehumanise and, in doing so, do away with selfishness, violence, and social injustice. In order to rehumanise, an individual must form a community with other people. By extension, if a person is deceptive, manipulative, and violent, they lack ubuntu and have strayed from becoming a person like other people (Metz & Gaie, 2010).

Ubuntu emerges from specific historic and cultural experience; that is to say, ubuntu is not *a priori* a universal concept of humanism. In the southern African region, ubuntu emerged from cultural experiences that include, but are not limited to, the protracted colonial conflict, failure by political leadership to build on past successes and avoid repeating past mistakes, failure to manage diversity, and electoral violence (Mohiddin, 2007). There are inherent limitations because of these specific historic and cultural experiences. For example, describing transformative leadership in terms of ubuntu might support linguistic or ethnic chauvinism. This is partly due to the labelling and dismissal of anyone who holds views contrary to those of Africa’s ruling elite as a ‘racist, reactionary sell-out, agent of imperialism, political prostitute, cockroach, traitor, or prophet of doom’ (Akindele, Olaopa, & Salaam, 2009, p. 6). Another challenge for ubuntu is that political leaders in Africa who claim to champion ubuntu values often inflict violence and other forms of abuse on the people they lead (Van Wyk, 2007).

Since 2008, xenoracist and afrophobic attacks on foreign nationals have occurred on a regular basis in South Africa (Tirivangasi & Rapanyane, 2021). Xenoracism and afrophobia are the polar opposite of ubuntu. They are motivated by a fear of the other, a fear that turns into hatred, and a desire to destroy the other. These prejudices extinguish the spirit of ubuntu in the southern African community (Breed & Semanya, 2015).

Other evidence of ubuntu’s failure is the apparent inability to transfer political power without violence or widespread electoral controversy, which only serves to highlight the continent’s poor, and often corrupt, leadership. Elections are rigged, and potential successors are persecuted, forced into exile, or killed. Political dissent is frowned upon in some circles. This is evident in Lesotho, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Terrorist insurgence in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, which has persisted since 2017, is another example of a challenge to ubuntu (Zvomuya, 2020). As a philosophy of existence, ubuntu (Breed & Semanya, 2015; Valk, 2010) continues to struggle to meet the needs of the diverse population of southern Africa that it intends to serve. Evidence of this comes in the form of unprecedented levels of crime, violence,

unemployment, poverty, xenoracism/afrophobia, and terrorist insurgency (Isilow, 2019; Zvomuya, 2020).

Despite the foregoing problematic aspects associated with ubuntu, academics have invoked ubuntu in an attempt to address Africa's leadership challenges (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Ncube, 2010; Nzimakwe, 2014). This is partly because ubuntu seeks to promote the wellbeing of the collective society and supports societal reform rather than pursuing sectoral interests. It embraces participation, collaboration, and collective efforts, and promotes teamwork (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Ncube, 2010; Nzimakwe, 2014). In similar way, the African Union's adoption of Agenda 2063 (a strategic framework for the socioeconomic transformation of the continent over the next 50 years), as well as its policy application of ubuntu, demonstrates a desire to address Africa's socioeconomic and leadership challenges (Zvomuya, 2020) in this way. The African Union policy framework expresses the point of view that all human beings desire to live in a society where human rights are respected, where social justice is upheld, and equity and human dignity are prioritised (Adjibolosoo, 1999). As such, since ubuntu embodies common humanity and responsibility towards each other, a leader with ubuntu, it is assumed, will exhibit transformative leadership values such as social justice, respect for human rights, and a participatory approach. Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to understand how ubuntu leadership is closely linked to transformative leadership.

To achieve its aim, this chapter took a qualitative research approach to the descriptive, exploratory, and normative tasks (Osmer, 2008). Through the descriptive task, the researcher was able to explore the extent to which ubuntu leadership bears a family resemblance to transformative leadership. The researcher's normative task determined how ubuntu leadership is closely linked to transformative leadership.

Documentary analysis was used to investigate how ubuntu leadership resembles transformative leadership. A literature search was conducted using databases including EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Elsevier, SAGE, Taylor & Francis, Sabinet, and African Journals Online to identify articles on the concepts of transformative leadership and ubuntu leadership. Four key attributes were used to identify ubuntu leadership and transformative leadership. The first of these was social justice; the second was efforts to demolish structures of inequality and oppression; the third, a people-centred approach that embodies collaboration, consultation, and empowerment; and fourth, ethical leadership. The search yielded 20 articles that could help frame how ubuntu leadership resembles transformative leadership.

The chapter is organised as follows: the second section reviews transformative leadership theory. The third section delves into a conceptual analysis of ubuntu and ubuntu leadership. The fourth section goes into detail about the essential

features of ubuntu leadership, and how they are similar to transformative leadership. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of ubuntu and transformative leadership to present an ubuntu-infused framework for transformative leadership.

Transformative leadership theory

According to Shields and Hesbol (2020, p. 5), transformative leadership theory is a 'broad, diverse, and heterogeneous set of perspectives that share a desire to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are frequently reproduced, frequently rationalised, sometimes resisted, and occasionally transformed'. Transformative leadership emphasises inclusion, equity, excellence, and social justice. It begins with questions of justice and democracy by critiquing the inequitable status quo and offers the promise of a better life lived in common with others, not just greater individual achievement (Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016). Transformative leadership is characterised by leadership traits such as empowerment and participatory decision-making (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). It assumes that everyone, regardless of their location, socioeconomic or political standing, or ability, has a responsibility to contribute to the creation of a better society (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018).

The origins of transformative leadership and how it evolved are still debatable. One school of thought states that transformative leadership is based on Burns and Bass's transformational leadership theory (Hewitt, Davis, & Lashley, 2014; Kuada, 2010). This view defines transformative leadership as a process with a liberative and social justice agenda attempting to address structures that perpetuate inequality in society (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018). Another school credits transformative leadership to William Foster, an educator whose beliefs on transformative leadership were closely linked to Paulo Freire's conscientisation theory. This school has defined transformative leadership as a process that aims to conscientise individuals, urging them to produce the change, creativity, and empowerment they wish to see (Bukusi, 2020; Shields, 2010).

Given the above, it is essential to highlight that transformative leadership and transformational leadership form part of a branch of leadership theory associated with directing change and transformation. One of the major identifiable distinctions between transformative leadership and transformational leadership is that the latter is primarily concerned with organisational transformation and renewal. Accordingly, transformational leaders are primarily focused on revitalising institutional culture, leading others in the achievement of organisational goals, and motivating team members to identify with and pursue the collective vision (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018). Transformational leaders can be directive, participative, authoritarian, or democratic, but they primarily sell their idea or vision to their subordinates by presenting it in the most passionate and appealing way possible (Hewitt et al., 2014; Montuori & Donnelly,

2018). Ironically, transformational leadership cannot account for unjust social, economic, and political structures, and tends to turn a blind eye to dismantling patterns of domination at institutional level. Transformative leadership, on the other hand, responds to inequality, social injustice, and oppressive structures by devising strategies to dismantle those structures of power and privilege that act against equity and freedom in society (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018).

Following from the reasoning above, it can be argued that transformative leadership is a rejection of elite domination in decision-making and politics. It supports people becoming agents, regardless of their location, socioeconomic or political status, or aptitude, taking responsibility for their own wellbeing and, subsequently, becoming transformative leaders themselves.

Ubuntu defined

Ubuntu is a vision as well as a way of life (Valk, 2010). As a vision of life, ubuntu represents a preferred future characterised by the values of social justice, participatory decision-making, creative collaboration, ethical leadership, collectivism, and reciprocity. As a way of life, ubuntu connects people from past traditions such as collectivism, solidarity, and oneness, and it can be a useful framework for addressing immediate pressing issues such as corruption and sectarianism (Ncube, 2010; Valk, 2010).

In principle, ubuntu rests on the affirmation 'I am because we are', which suggests the idea that one's humanity is affirmed through the affirmation of the humanity of other people. The affirmation resonates well with the Christian biblical saying 'Do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12). By extension, what other people say or do about a specific person matters because a person being a person through other people also means that the perceptions of others are central to one's humanity in ubuntu discourses. The emphasis here is on how a person interacts with other people. As a result, ubuntu is a manifestation of community, fellowship, and pre-existing networks between and among people. The central theme in ubuntu is that one's humanity is determined by how one interacts with other people in society. One way to lose one's humanity is to trick another and treat them like trash. As a result, one can be said to be failing to demonstrate humanity when engaging in anti-social behaviours such as violence or engineering another person's plight.

Ubuntu leadership

Several researchers have identified ubuntu as an African leadership style that contradicts Eurocentric leadership ideologies (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Mangaliso, Mangaliso, Knipes, Jean-Denis, & Ndanga, 2018; Nzimakwe, 2014). According to Ncube (2010), ubuntu can help African people realise

transformative leadership qualities through interdependence, collectivism, and participation. Nell (2017) claims that instead of individualistic and Western-oriented leadership styles, leaders in Africa could use ubuntu to embrace consensus building and collaborative problem-solving leadership approaches. Ubuntu leadership places people at the centre of everything (Nzimakwe, 2014). Rather than pursuing sectoral interests, ubuntu leadership works to enhance the welfare of the collective society and supports societal change (Mangaliso et al., 2018). From this, it is clear that ubuntu leadership is a leadership framework that helps people overcome challenges such as inequality, poverty, and structural violence, regardless of their location, gender, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, or racism.

The primary goal of ubuntu leadership is to guard against the abuse of power by those in leadership positions. It also guards against authoritarian tendencies where some political leaders think they have the prerogative to impose their own individualist agendas on their subjects. It censors the absolutism prevalent in contemporary African leadership in which some leaders personalise political power. Behaviours that are considered to be detrimental to societal development are discouraged through ubuntu leadership (Ncube, 2010).

Further to that, ubuntu leadership reminds us that the decision-making process should be a joint action between leader and followers, and not a one-person race. In other words, actions taken by political leaders should be taken with the consent of their subjects. While ubuntu leadership acknowledges that human beings are susceptible to making errors, it recognises that 'a leader is a leader through their people' and that leadership is only legitimate when it embraces collectivity, solidarity, humanness, and reciprocity between the ruler and the ruled (Breed & Semanya, 2015). Accordingly, consultation and negotiation between the ruler and the subjects is key to achieving true leadership in Africa.

Does ubuntu leadership bear a family resemblance to transformative leadership?

Ubuntu has been applied in education, politics (the African Renaissance), and business (through collective learning, teamwork, sustainability, a local community focus, and an alternative to extractive capitalism). It has also been applied in corporate governance (via fairness, collectiveness, and humility) and restorative justice (using dialogue, collective restitution, and healing). Through the ubuntu ethos of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, it has also been applied in conflict resolution and reconciliation (Nzimakwe, 2014).

Transformative leadership is concerned with social justice

Social justice involves issues of marginalisation, power, and privilege (Bukusi, 2020). The four interconnected principles of social justice are equity, access, participation, and rights. Justice is a universal concept found in all cultures and traditions (Valk, 2010) and transformative leadership is concerned with issues of justice, democracy, and inequity, as well as rebuilding communities (Bukusi, 2020). These attributes of justice are similar to ubuntu. In southern Africa, justice is viewed as doing what is right and moral in society (Letseka, 2014) and the concept connotes the idea that people must consider themselves to be joined or connected to others. This is accomplished through sharing, networking, and developing relationships with others. In general, actions are only judged to be right if they do not intentionally cause difficulties for other people in a communal relationship. What is unjust is perpetuating another person's suffering (Metz & Gaie, 2010). Accordingly, transformative leadership is linked to the southern African justice framework in that transformative leadership seeks to recreate new structures and reciprocal and trusting relationships, interactions, and systems (Mills, Simmons, & Helms Mills, 2005). For that reason, transformative leaders are needed in 21st-century Africa to help overcome socioeconomic and political upheavals by promoting equity, access to resources, and participation in decision-making processes.

Transformative leadership addresses unequal and oppressive structures

An oppressive structure consists of an organisation that imposes hierarchical relationships on its employees, uses bureaucratic communication channels, and follows draconian procedures for achieving the organisation's collective and individual goals. Transformative leadership believes that unequal power relations within the system cause conflict. It aims to confront and transform oppressive power structures in order to advance participatory principles (Mills, et al., 2005).

Furthermore, by challenging leaders' inappropriate use of power, transformative leadership seeks to address fundamental structural inequities that cause pain and disenfranchisement in society. It aspires to build a socially just, egalitarian, and democratic society (Hewitt et al., 2014). According to Ncube (2010), transformative leadership is a leadership style that has the potential to address Africa's leadership crisis, which is characterised by corruption, a failure to confront poverty and inequality, and the erosion of ethical norms. She believes that ubuntu leadership can feed into transformative leadership and help to defuse tensions and hostilities on the African continent (Ncube, 2010).

Apart from that, transformative leadership promotes equitable and inclusive societies and challenges dominant organisational structures by critically examining policies, programmes, and practices in order to completely reconfigure systems in society, allowing for equal access and inclusion, ultimately leading to a more just society. To achieve social justice, leaders must rehumanise through an ubuntu framework which embraces compassion, reciprocity, dignity, collectivism, love, and inclusivity (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Transformative leadership is ethical

One of transformative leadership's characteristics is that it promotes ethical values. Ethics is concerned with values such as reciprocity, peaceful relations, human dignity, tolerance, and mutual respect, among others (Ujomudike, 2016). Respect for the dignity of human life is one way to achieve a morally virtuous society. Human life, according to African culture, is a sacred gift that should be protected, nurtured, and cared for. Ubuntu embraces respect for human life. It treats human life as sacred regardless of status or ethnicity. Respect for human life promotes unity, solidarity, and stewardship of life. On this basis, African culture forbids murder, greed, and selfishness (Nzimakwe, 2014).

From an ethical point of view, ubuntu leadership is closely linked to transformative leadership in that ubuntu embraces a sense of duty to one's fellow humans, which emphasises humanity's oneness and interdependence, as well as the importance of preserving social solidarity at all times. Murithi (2006, p. 14) defines social solidarity as 'recognizing and treating each other as human beings, as well as a shared concern for each other's common welfare and well-being'. As a result, a reverence for human life is an appropriate starting point for a morally virtuous society. Ethical leadership assists in the development of positive relationships that ensure the security, safety, and wellbeing of others (Ncube, 2010).

Transformative leadership is democratic

The goal of transformative leadership is to make the world a more democratic place. Individuals and groups contribute to a democratic society by reaching agreements in their daily activities in homes, villages, and communities. Transformative leadership embraces teamwork. It allows members of the group to share information freely and openly discuss issues affecting their wellbeing. Everyone is given a seat at the table, and the discussion can be relatively unstructured (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018). Transformative leadership facilitates conversations, encourages people to share their ideas, and then synthesises all available and relevant information in order to change situations that need to change. The benefits of democratic leadership are that decision-making processes are more likely to be owned by all stakeholders, it aids implementation, and it encourages others to accept decisions and changes (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018).

To build a democratic society, ubuntu reminds us that decision-making should be a collaborative effort rather than a one-person show. The Shona adage '*Kukanya hurangana*' (consensus is essential when sharing a meal) emphasises the importance of acting in the best interests of others. In terms of participation, actions taken at any level of society, including the family, village, and government, should be carried out with the consent of others in order to develop a truly democratic society. This chapter contends that consultation and negotiation between individuals and groups at all levels of society are critical for achieving a democratic society. As a result, participation is essential, because some people believe they have the right to impose their individualist agendas on others. To prevent this situation, ubuntu limits the absolute monarchy that exists in some households, villages, and communities, while also encouraging individual and communal engagement (Kanu, 2014).

A synthesis of the family resemblance between ubuntu and transformative leadership

Ubuntu is timeless in the sense that it has been used by previous generations and will be used by future generations (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). It is a value system based on democratic values, transformation, and liberation, all of which are critical components of transformative leadership. As a result, transformative leadership is intertwined with ubuntu, as African leaders are expected to rehumanise by respecting fellow humans; promoting justice and positive relationships; avoiding selfishness, greed, and violence against others; and promoting participatory decision-making. These leadership ideals stem from African traditions that, long before colonialism, embraced participatory approaches to governance and decision-making. Traditional chiefs in Zimbabwe and South Africa, for example, used to collaborate with a council of elders who represented people at the grassroots to promote participatory decision-making, inclusivity, and social justice in society (Ujomudike, 2016).

Another key aspect is that ubuntu is a people-centred philosophy in the sense that it follows an indaba style of open discussion among a group of people working toward a common goal (Letseka, 2014). It emphasises responsible and ethical leadership that puts people first. The ubuntu adage 'A person is a person because of others' suggests that society has a responsibility to help people realise their potential. The adage further conveys the idea that a leader is connected to others and that these connections should be treasured. The ubuntu value system instils in leaders the need to recognise their common humanity, which is to say that we are all (leader and subjects) one family. Within the transformative leadership framework, ubuntu can be used as a tool to combat intolerance, dehumanisation, exploitation, and authoritarianism by southern African political leaders (Ujomudike, 2016).

In addition, African social justice is concerned with the repairing of broken relationships and the attainment of equilibrium. It contributes to the restoration of law and order as well as addressing unequal oppressive structures, which is a critical component of transformative leadership. Ubuntu seeks to meet the needs of the community through an African justice that is victim-centred. After conflict, crime, or violence, the African justice system embraces restorative justice in which the restoration of victim, offender, and community relationships is central. In an African justice system, offenders must answer to both the victim and the community. Such a scenario helps to restore balance through reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing, which are central to ubuntu (Elechi, Morris, & Schauer, 2010).

One of the central ideas of transformative leadership is to guide people toward a better world, one that is greater than their current difficulties. Leadership that thinks ahead is transformative. It immerses people in the future, taking them on a journey beyond their current existential problems. Planning for the future entails concentrating on what is feasible, probable, and preferred for tomorrow. As we consider how to get to our ideal future, the issue of individuals and groups taking responsibility for their own wellbeing arises. The process of constructing a desired future requires everyone, regardless of socioeconomic, political, or gender position, to participate in planning and devising solutions in order to work creatively together toward a future world of social justice, democracy, collectivism, humanity, and solidarity. Transformative leadership's strength is that it is action-oriented, with a focus on creating a better future, rather than forecasting it.

Because transformative leadership begins with a critical examination of the status quo in order to eliminate structural injustice, it aids us in comprehending the society we do not want to live in by plunging us into the future world we desire. Regardless of obstacles, being future-oriented forces us to question and identify our existing limitations, as well as imagine how these limitations may be transcended. Both ubuntu and transformative leadership help us to think outside the box by opening our minds to new possibilities. What is even more invigorating about transformative leadership and ubuntu is that both engage people from all walks of life and from all corners of the globe (Nzimakwe, 2014). Both are participatory in the sense that they resist top-down approaches and strive to engage everyone.

Transformative leadership emphasises the importance of a worldview. Ubuntu, as a worldview and moral system, propels Africans into a more humanitarian future, one that accepts collectivism as its foundation, and a future free of xenophobia, regionalism, and all forms of violence. People's perceptions of the

world have an impact on their future. Worldviews are important because they provide a picture of how things should be, regardless of the current state of affairs. It is important to note, as with ubuntu, that some worldviews are life-enhancing, while others are life-threatening (while it could be disputed, this proposition is a subject for another discussion). Ubuntu is life-enhancing in that it affirms that no single person is more sacred than others, regardless of gender, age, socioeconomic status, or political affiliation – everyone is equal in terms of dignity and worth (Ncube, 2010).

Conclusion: The way forward

This chapter has shown that ubuntu leadership bears a family resemblance to transformative leadership. The chapter argues that in order to act to transform structures that sustain autocracy, sectarianism, and regionalism in some parts of southern Africa, such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, there is a need to embrace the values of social justice and democracy, dismantle oppressive structures, and follow ethical and people-centred approaches. Citizens in these southern African societies should work as a collective to make a break with structures that dehumanise people through divisions and sectarianism, and begin to re-imagine an African society with ubuntu.

The following elements may serve as building blocks for a transformed society. First, we should accept the reality that transformation is an unfinished task that requires continual efforts from all levels of society so as to inculcate the values of social justice and participation at all levels. Second, approaches to transformative leadership in Africa have been predominantly informed by Western-oriented models. There is a need for a shift from these Western-oriented frameworks to those informed by ubuntu – an African philosophy of existence. Finally, in the course of re-imagining ubuntu, we should reconstruct an ethos that focuses on the dignity of humanity by embracing a people-first principle, rather than focusing on material things. Throughout human history, people in some African societies have suffered due to sectarianism through inhuman policies such as colonialism and Apartheid. Therefore, there is a need to embrace a transformative leadership approach that fosters collective efforts, non-violence, and a shared vision, as contemporary African societies are crying out for a better future that is free from xenoracist and afrophobic attacks on foreign nationals.

#UbuntuAsLeadershipResource

The philosophy of ubuntu emphasises the collective over the individual, social justice, and interconnectedness. Unfortunately, people often pay lip service to ubuntu while oppressing and dominating others.

Questions for discussion

1. Which terms and phrases in your language and culture are closely associated with ubuntu and transformative leadership?
2. Is ubuntu still relevant in a globalised African society?
3. How best can leadership practices be decolonised in African societies?

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