



Enhancing African Leadership

For any company, their most valuable asset is human capital, but only effective leadership can actually realise its true worth, as **Stephen Williams** learned from Dr Tunde Ekpe, a specialist consultant in management skills and coaching.

It's a science, explained Dr Ekpe, the founder-director of Optimentus as she told me about her consultancy services. "If a client comes to us and says 'please identify people that we desperately require for particular roles,' or 'we have many internal candidates, who should we promote to the next level?', I use rigorous, research-based methods to assess them based on the key competencies that are necessary to do the job effectively."

Because Optimentus has clients around the world, that raises the question of the very different cultural values that, even in a rapidly globalising world, exist in different countries and regions. "There are some aspects of leadership that are universal, that are common across cultures, that you can evaluate the same way," she adds. "But there are some that are not that easy to evaluate."

"For example, I am just making generalisations here, but a Japanese candidate for a management role might be a bit more respectful, a bit more reticent about saying 'no' or putting themselves forward, although they never say 'no' really!

"Then you have differences between Africans. You've got West Africans; they are generally more aggressive and more direct

than say East Africans who will be more understated, but East Africans say what they mean eventually – just not in the very direct manner that their West African counterpart might."

It follows that Ekpe is not prepared to rate a person just on certain attributes, because those attributes might reflect cultural differences. The key thing is, she insists, to actually devise an assessment that is aware of those cultural distinctions.

"The technical skills are usually self-evident but it's more difficult to unearth the leadership behaviours necessary to effectively carry out a specific role," she says

Selection by Optimentus is rigorous and based on a mixture of competency-based interviews, simulation exercises and psychometric tests conducted by trained psychologists and assessors. "Our final recommendation is thus based on the clear evidence we have before us."

Optimentus recognises the importance of evaluating a candidate's leadership traits; whether they have them in the first place and how they demonstrate an ability to interact with others. In other words, it's essential to assess their emotional intelligence, their

ability to strategise, formulate a vision and then, in Ekpe's own words, "to cascade it to others successfully".

Cross-cultural issues

Ekpe has carried out research on cultural issues in multinational organisations and she has worked in Russia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, France, Italy, India, Canada and the USA – and across Africa in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Botswana, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal and Burkina Faso – so has extensive international experience. "I am British and of African descent. Some of the cross-cultural issues that companies face when they are recruiting, I have experienced myself and I can articulate them without embarrassment," Ekpe says. "It's something of an advantage to have dual nationality and not be restricted by political correctness."

She says there was once a time when executive assessments were a bit more definitive, when candidates had to behave in a particular and predefined way to succeed. But then people started saying, 'that might be, say, the North American way of doing business, but it's not the African way'.

"But the thing is," Ekpe elaborates, "when we are doing assessments, we measure ability to behave effectively. We have to be careful not to attribute everything to culture; it might be more of a personality issue."

In fact, there are a number of other competencies that an Optimentus assessment will assess, for example determining whether a

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management style takes into account what another person might be feeling.

"You have to work towards becoming a better leader and that in turn means to lead without resorting to fear," according to Ekpe. "There are a lot of people who rule with a very heavy hand. They say 'I am the boss, you do as I say and that's it'. That leaves a lot to be desired with regard to emotional intelligence, the art of interacting effectively with people.

"These people are perfectly nice people in a social setting and they will tell you about all the work that needs to be done and that being heavy handed is the only way to get it done and stuff like that. I say to them 'yes, but you've got to recognise the other person as a human being as well, and you just never know when you are going to need them again. They might even become your boss tomorrow and then you'll really be in trouble!'"

Ekpe is also somewhat critical of the African executive's tendency to fail to be proactive about their own development. Again she cautions that her observations are generalisations, but from her experience, she still believes that many African managers simply do not read enough.

"Now when I say proactive," she explains, "I mean I often go into an organisation and I hear people who are supposed to be leaders complain 'It took them 10 years to put me on a training programme'. But I think, at that level, you are earning a hell of a lot of money and you can afford to take three days off and go and improve yourself. You could even go online or read a book.

"A lot of African managers do not read. They want to be spoon-fed, and even when they are having one-on-one interventions where they are supposed to formulate their own solutions, what they want is for me to tell them what to do next. So that's a key thing, African leaders need to do more to improve their skills."

A perfect case study

Ekpe also observes that many African managers have huge egos! But, she says, it's a critical skill for any leader to be able to put their ego aside, sit and take feedback from subordinates and peers and accept it as an objective and constructive view and not a personal attack.

As a consultant, Ekpe does a lot of one-

Tips

10 free tips for top leadership from Optimentus

Learn continuously

Effective leadership is enhanced through continuous improvement and development of self. Learning can be achieved through formal means (training, seminars, academia) as well as more informal channels (feedback from trusted others, reflexivity and reading books).

Empathy and Emotional intelligence

The more responsibility leaders have, the greater the expectation on them to be able to understand others. This means they have to be aware of their strengths and shortcomings and how these might affect their dealings with others. Learning to put themselves in others' shoes is key to achieving interpersonal effectiveness.

Assertiveness

The most effective leaders are adept at communicating what they want (and getting it) in a non-aggressive manner. They focus on desired behaviours and avoid emotional language so that others are less resistant to doing what is required of them.

Develop others

True leadership means developing others and encouraging them to take leadership roles at all levels. Delegation of stretch assignments with minimal supervision is one way of providing on-the-job development that will also enhance motivation.

Enthuse and Empower

Leaders should always strive to enthuse and motivate others by empowering them to carry out what is required and more. Coaching and mentoring are key tools that aid the more effective leader in this regard.

Resolve conflict

Effective leaders are looked up to by others and may have to resolve conflict from time to time when dealing with their teams. Never let bad blood fester and develop into team dysfunction. Tackle issues head on and whilst maintaining objectivity, address issues of bad behaviour in a solution-focused way; rather than dwell on blame, seek constructive ways forward.

Share the vision and Strategy

It is all too easy for teams and organisations to lose their way, and effective leaders constantly remind others of their mission, vision and strategy. In addition, they are open to constructive feedback about what works well or not so well and are prepared to set aside their egos and consider possible changes in direction.

Humility, Honesty, Humour

These three traits of great leaders facilitate integrity, ethics, effective interpersonal relationships and trust; these have a positive effect on respectful working environments, corporate governance and desirable organisational culture.

Initiate action

Effective leaders are not 'ditherers'. When something needs doing, effective leaders make decisions, give clear instructions and milestones and guide others to fulfilling what is required.

Proactivity

Truly competent leaders are positive and proactive and this means they are constantly thinking strategically, considering the impact of their proposed actions, and preparing and planning for any outcomes. They think outside the box in order to come up with ideas no one else has considered and they focus on people issues.

on-one assessment consultancy and executive leadership coaching across Africa. And she has a perfect case study to observe – her husband Arnold is, as chief executive of the Ecobank Group, one of Africa's most senior bankers. When I asked Ekpe whether she offers him her opinion (as a PhD in Work and Organisational Psychology) she told me she frequently does so – "and it drives him absolutely mental, but I think he'd be the first to say that I have some psychological insight into his working life.

"For me, it has been a real bonus having a husband like that because I am aware of a lot

of the journeys he has had to take in doing his work. It's really quite interesting for me to see his organisation flourish and see things coming together because he really believes in addressing leadership issues.

"Every now and again he says, 'Oh, I am not sure how to handle this' – I don't mean his technical decisions, I would never think of saying I know anything about that – but he often comes back and says 'You know, I tried what you advised and it seems to be working'; then again sometimes he says, 'I tried it and it didn't work'. And I have to say, 'You just have to be patient.'" ■

