

# Re-Appropriating the Ubuntu Leadership Style

Andre Mboule\*

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce a style of leadership that could be adopted by African managers and leaders to improve their individual performance. An African endogenous leadership style could be founded on the Ubuntu philosophy "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*", which means "a person is a person through other persons" (Mbiti, 1989, as cited in Mfuniselwa, n.d.; Nkomo, 2006) in the Xhosa or Nguni languages. The study shows that the determinants of the Ubuntu leadership style would influence a team and an organisation in the following ways: (i) creating an Ubuntu spirit in a team, (ii) creating an organisation with a "human side" and (iii) making an organisation spiritually sensitive. The following determinants of the African Ubuntu leadership effectiveness have been defined: personality of the leader, human relationships, reproduction of leaders, transformation of the organisation, training of leaders, coaching and mentoring. The practical application of the African Ubuntu leadership style would start within the family or community, - considered as the smallest unit of society, - or in a team, - considered as the smallest unit of an organisation. In some extent, the African Ubuntu leadership style could be taught in organisational leadership courses in academic institutions or professional training institutes.

**Keywords:** African Mind, Ubuntu Philosophy, Leadership Style, Delphi Method, Team

## Introduction

The essence of this article was presented during the CERDOTOLA International Conference (CIC2022) that took place in Yaounde (Cameroon) on 25-28 October 2022, under the theme "Talks for a New African Mind." The article topic "Re-appropriating the Ubuntu Leadership

Style" was discussed among six other speakers in the panel on "Re-inventing the social link politics and public institutions: Issues of Peacebuilding, Coexistence, and Universality". While many scholars and researchers from Cameroon, Africa, and abroad met during the CIC2022 Conference to exchange on the "New African Mind", the author asserted that he had already found it in the Ubuntu philosophy.

In searching for performance in African organisations and individuals, many areas such as good governance, the fight against corruption, political change, economic transformation, social inclusion and results-based management are regularly explored and disseminated. Government institutions and private organisations have adopted many of these concepts for the search of effectiveness and efficiency.

The problem that strikes one's mind is that, despite the political will and the capacity development in the implementation of the concepts above, solutions for performance improvements in the "big settings" (ministries, public companies, private companies, civil society organisations, political parties, etc.) are still lagging. Among the difficulties that cause slow performance in these organisations, lies the weakness in management and leadership competences. Performance in organisations could improve and boost up in considering individual performance through leadership development.

This article provides excerpts from a doctoral thesis (Mboule, 2021) in which leadership appears as a critical feature in the characterisation of a particular project management approach or model that was studied. In this article, the author points out the purpose and a brief literature review about leadership. The research question and the methodology are also exposed. The findings and the discussion sections also form part of this paper.

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\* School of Health Sciences (ESS), Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC), Yaounde, CAMEROON.  
Email: [mboule.andre@gmail.com](mailto:mboule.andre@gmail.com)

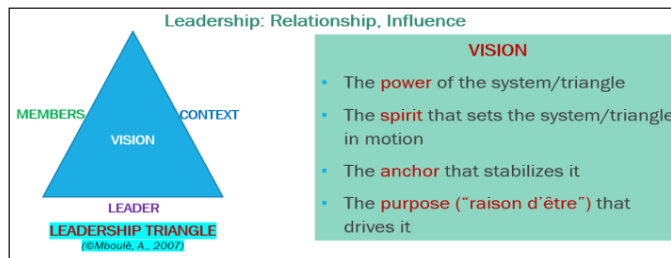
## Purpose of the Paper

While the scholars and researchers who met during the CIC2022 Conference were exchanging on the “New African Mind”, the author asserted that he had already found it in the Ubuntu philosophy. The purpose of this article is to introduce a style of leadership that could be adopted by African and non-African managers and leaders to improve their individual performance. This article indicates how an African endogenous leadership style, in contrast with Western paradigms, could be founded on the Ubuntu philosophy “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which means “a person is a person through other persons” (Mbiti, 1989, as cited in Mfuniselwa, n.d.; Nkomo, 2006) in the Xhosa or Nguni languages. “Ubuntu” is acknowledged as the African mind, the African personality and the African identity, given that almost all the African languages have their own formulation of the Ubuntu concept.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

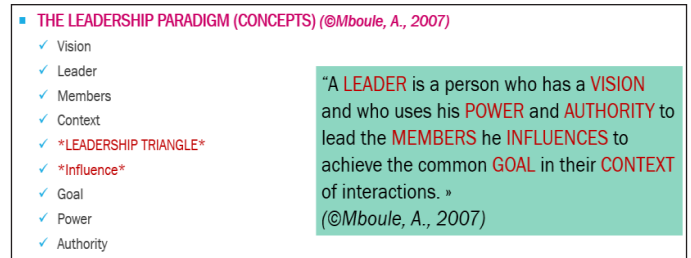
### Leadership

Northouse (2017) defines leadership as “a process by which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”. Leadership is founded upon a relationship and influence (Mboule, 2007); a relationship is established among the leader, the team members and the organisational context, whereas the vision (or common goal) is the influencing factor (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1: Leadership Triangle and Vision**

While approaching leadership as a paradigm, i.e., “a concept of concepts”, the above leadership triangle and the main leader’s characteristics provide the leadership components shown in Fig. 2 below (Mboule, 2007).



**Fig. 2: The Leadership Paradigm and the Leader**

According to Dahlggaard et al. (1998, p. 54), “*Empowerment is building power into people; building power into people is building leadership, building leadership is building a ship of leaders, building a ship of leaders is creating many leaders, who work together on a common aim*” (p. 54). In other words, leaders are the individuals who enable the development of other leaders and who consider their collaborators as co-leaders or pro-leaders, i.e. “leaders in the making”.

### Leadership Effectiveness and Team

Leadership is exercised with a leader and team members or collaborators. People who form a set and come together to cooperate and achieve a common goal or purpose constitute a team. As Lee et al. (2006) stated, teams are formed to achieve specific interdependent learning goals or task performances. Team members work under the authority, power and influence of the team leader.

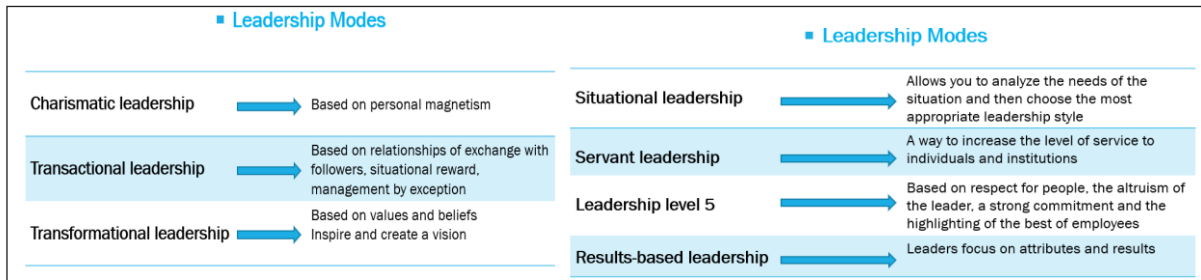
The effectiveness of leadership, according to Yukl (2006), relies upon the group influence process, i.e., the extent to which team members trust each other and cooperate in the accomplishment of task objectives.

### Leadership Modes

The development of leadership theories or leadership modes depends on a combination of management approaches and circumstances (Demirtas & Karaca, 2020). The following leadership modes have been extensively studied and described in the literature (Demirtas & Karaca, 2020; Northouse, 2017; Collins, 2001; Yukl, 2006; Ulrich, Zenger & Smallwood, 1999; Greenleaf, 1995; Bass, 1985): charismatic leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership,

situational leadership, servant leadership, level-five leadership and results-based leadership. The principles

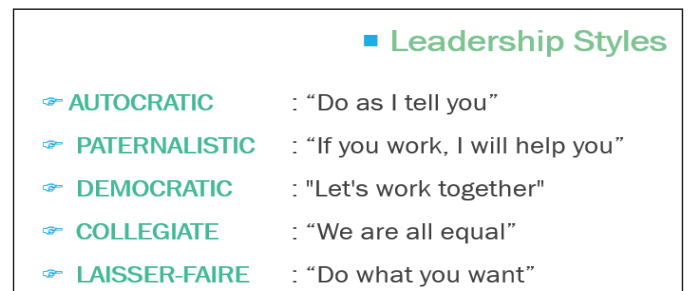
of these leadership modes are briefly summarised below (Fig. 3):



**Fig. 3: Leadership Theories – Summary of Principles**

### Leadership Styles

A leadership style is the way a leader behaves; the leader’s behaviour depends on situations and locations where the leader exercises leadership (Demirtas & Karaca, 2020). A leadership style indicates to what extent the leader’s collaborators participate in decision-making and decision implementation processes. Given the flourishing of leadership styles in the literature, we have chosen to characterise the following: autocratic, paternalistic, democratic, collegiate and laissez-faire (Demirtas & Karaca, 2020; Northouse, 2017; Greenleaf, 1995; Bass, 1985). A rapid understanding of how behaviours define a leadership style is given below in aphorisms (Fig. 4):



**Fig. 4: Leadership Styles in Aphorisms**

The following table (Table 1) shows the behaviours and attitudes that describe the selected leadership styles:

**Table 1: Leadership Styles, Behaviours and Attitudes**

Leadership Styles				
	<b>AUTOCRATIC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Centralizes decisions</li> <li>Commands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decides everything</li> <li>Rebukes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Threatens</li> <li>Do not delegate authority</li> <li>Do not trust</li> </ul>
	<b>PATERNALISTIC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Benevolent and charitable attitude</li> <li>Motivates by reward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Values those who are submissive</li> <li>Punishes those who do not respond to his expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows favoritism</li> <li>Manipulate employees</li> <li>Requests and accepts suggestions sometimes</li> <li>Does not promote teamwork</li> </ul>
	<b>DEMOCRATIC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delegation of authority</li> <li>Trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages participation in decision-making</li> <li>Acts as a liaison officer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinates activities</li> <li>Directs energies</li> <li>Encourages creativity and initiative</li> <li>Discusses with his members</li> </ul>
	<b>COLLEGIATE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each member is a leader</li> <li>Based on mutual support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance given to loyalty, friendship and exchange</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not like to be told what to do</li> <li>Members have the same interests, qualifications, and skills</li> </ul>
	<b>LAISSEZ-FAIRE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show little interest in his work</li> <li>Each member has their own goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has no influence on the behavior of their members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wants to avoid conflicts and problems</li> <li>Believes that it is impossible to get a good productivity</li> <li>Never makes a decision</li> <li>Blames others</li> </ul>

### Bad Leadership

As opposed to “effective leadership” or “good leadership” there is “ineffective leadership” or “bad leadership”. Bad leadership in the workplace results in the following

actions and behaviours (Erickson, Shaw & Agabe, 2007):

- Leaders who fail to consistently motivate and appropriately reward staff.
- Leaders who display behaviours such as laziness, absence, and indecision, among others.

- Leaders who lack traits such as honesty and integrity.

The manifestations of wickedness and evil in organisations and the workplace have been identified as “faces of evil” or “corporate killers” (Dahlggaard, Dahlggaard & Edgeman, 1998). These anti-values that constitute the germs of bad leadership are illustrated in Fig. 5 below:

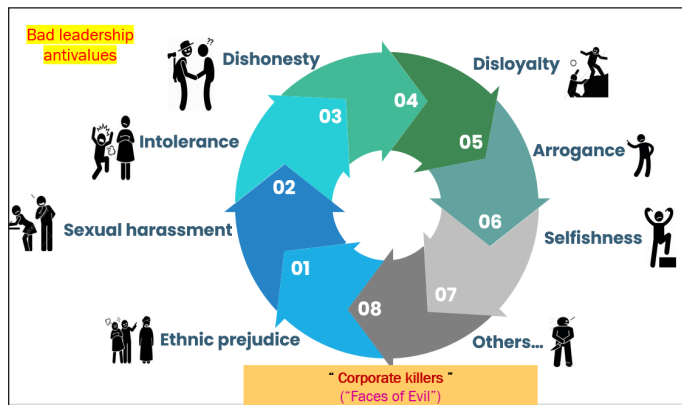


Fig. 5: Bad Leadership Antivalues

## Ubuntu

Ubuntu, the African philosophy, finds its meaningfulness in the following expression in Xhosa or Nguni languages: “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which means “a person is a person through other persons” (Mbiti, 1989, as cited in Mfuniselwa, n.d.). Ubuntu is recognised as both the African thought, the African philosophy and the basis of the African personality; it is also explained as being the essence of the African spirit. In fact, you find Ubuntu in all African languages, if not in most of these languages.

Ubuntu, as the African management thought, would emphasise traditionalism, communalism, cooperative teamwork and mythology (Nkomo, 2006). The intertwining of these four foundations of the Ubuntu philosophy as well as their respective components is described below in Fig. 6:

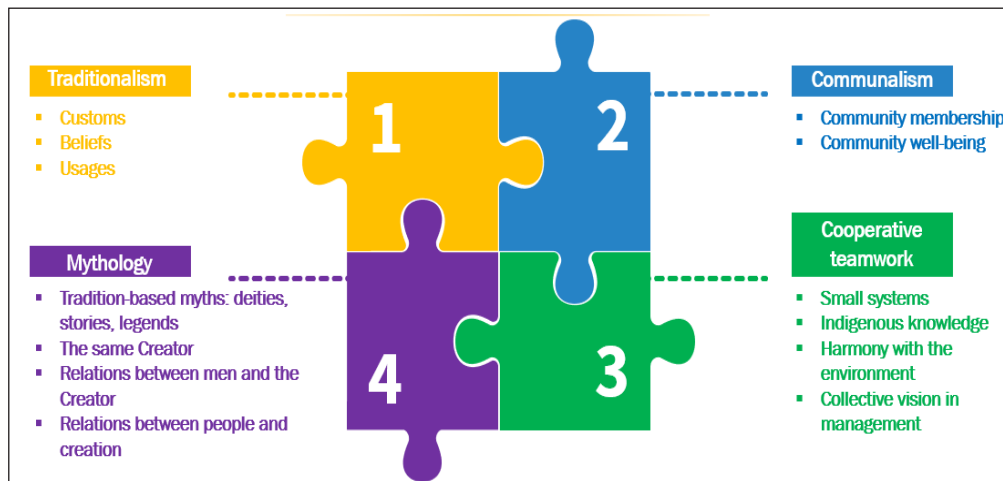


Fig. 6: The Foundations of the Ubuntu Philosophy

## Research Question

In coherence with the need to improve individual performance through leadership development and the purpose of introducing a new leadership style that could be adopted by African leaders, the research question that is explored is the following:

**Research Question:** How to characterise a leadership style based on the Ubuntu concept?

The research provides the determinants of the Ubuntu

leadership style. The determinants of the Ubuntu leadership style effectiveness also proceed from this research.

## Methodology

### Research Method or Approach

The overall study related to a qualitative approach. In fact, the research topic focuses on a “real-world” situation and a complex phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod,

2015): a leadership style founded on the African Ubuntu philosophy.

### Research Design

The Delphi method seemed more appropriate for our study. In this study, we needed to collect the opinions and judgements of experts and practitioners (Yousuf, 2007) with skills in the following areas: project management, leadership development, entrepreneurship and organisational strategy. In the overall study, 12 experts accepted to form the panel. This panel is characterised as follows: six men, six women, seven African nationalities, and six countries of residence in Africa, Europe, and America.

### Data Collection

Data collection consisted of using a series of questionnaires to the identified group of experts and, consequently, involving an interaction between the researcher and the expert panel (Yousuf, 2007). The Delphi process comprised three basic steps in which open-ended questions were followed by later rounds of consensus-building among the experts. Each questionnaire followed an online interview protocol on SurveyMonkey®.

### Data Analysis

In this phase, the researcher identified a comprehensive set of themes in the data by using inductive reasoning through the building of study patterns and categories (Creswell, 2009). Data analysis in the overall study required the use of a qualitative data analysis software: we adopted NVivo® as the most appropriate application for this study.

### Findings

Among other questions in the first-round questionnaire, the researcher asked the twelve-expert panel what leadership role model they would recommend among the three following models: (i) Action-centred leadership or functional approach (Role Model 1), (ii) skills-related leadership (Role Model 2) and (iii) African Ubuntu (humanness, human excellence) or African good leadership (“A leader is a leader because of other people”) (Role Model 3).

The participants preferably recommend the African Ubuntu “good leadership” role model (58.33%) supported by a skills-related leadership role model (41.67%) (Mboule, 2021) (see Table 2).

**Table 2: The Preferences of Delphi Panel Experts on Leadership Role Models**

ANSWER CHOICES	SCORE	RESPONSES
✓ Role Model 1: Action-centred leadership or Functional approach- Defining the task- Planning- Briefing- Controlling- Evaluating- Motivating- Organising- Providing an example	1/3	8.33% 1
✓ Role Model 2: Skills-related leadership+ Technical skills- Methods- Processes- Procedures- Techniques- Specific ability+ Interpersonal skills (social skills)- Human behavior- Interpersonal processes- Attitudes- Ability to understand feelings- Empathy- Social sensitivity- Speech fluency- Persuasiveness- Tact- Diplomacy+ Conceptual skills (cognitive skills)- Analytical ability- Logical thinking- Concept formation- Creativity- Anticipation- Inductive and deductive reasoning+ Administrative skills- as defined in Role model 1	1/3	41.67% 5
✓ Role Model 3: African Ubuntu (humanness, human excellence) or African good leadership"A leader is a leader because of other people."+ Collective values- Communal relationships- Communal enablement- Consensual decision-making- Power sharing- Cooperative participation- Unanimitarian democracy- Solidarity + Individual values- Sense of togetherness- Thinking as a "we"- Pride in collective accomplishments- Sharing a way of life- Achieving the good of all being- Sympathetic- Acting for the common good- Care- Serving the community- Commitment to the good of the community- Transparency- Trust- Listening skill- Knowledge about acceptable behavior	1/3	58.33% 7
<b>Total Respondents: 12</b>		

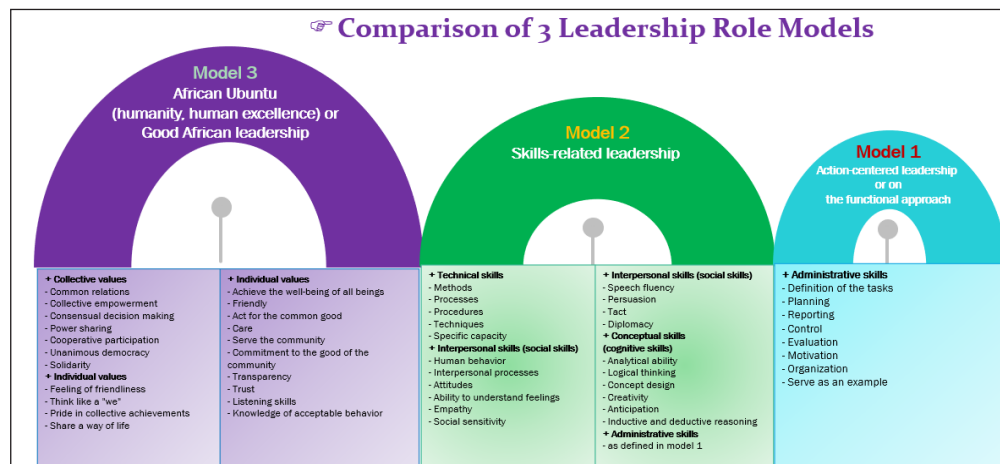
Panel expert (PM4) commented that *“I think African Ubuntu can be an enabler for Sustainable Development Entrepreneurship. In the face of current crises such as COVID-19 and global warming, the importance of thinking and acting for the well-being of “We” instead of “I” becomes crucial in leadership. Ubuntu leadership is so powerful that it could help resolve many of the challenges our societies are facing, like burnout among workers, a sense of loss of young people, racial conflicts, and wars.”* For panel expert (OS3), *“The African Ubuntu leadership style embraces all the others with a high sense of humanity... The project manager can achieve great results by communicating effectively with team members and build relationships based on trust and empathy.”* The panel expert (OS2) supported that *“Ubuntu is alright as long as it is backed by the right skills mix in all areas.”* Besides, panel expert (EP3) recommended *“the Role Model 2 (skills-related leadership role model) for a for-profit organization and the Role Model 3 (African ubuntu “good leadership” role model) for a not-for-profit organization.”*

For this study, a score of more than 70% indicated a strong consensus. The expert panel reached a “strong” consensus on recommending as the prominent leadership role model (90.91%) the African Ubuntu “good leadership” role model supported by the skills-related leadership role model (Mboule, 2021).

## Discussion

### Leadership

The study has contributed to comparing the following three leadership role models with their characteristics: (i) Action-centred leadership or functional approach (Role Model 1), (ii) skills-related leadership (Role Model 2), and (iii) African Ubuntu (humanness, human excellence) or African good leadership (Metz, 2018) - “A leader is a leader because of other people” - as the Role Model 3 (see Fig. 7).



**Fig. 7: Comparison of the Three Leadership Role Models**

The leadership role models 1 and 2 are respectively founded on “administrative” activities (action-centred leadership or functional approach) and the performance of skills, competences and experience (skills-orientated leadership). The leadership role model 3 (African Ubuntu leadership) is founded more on values (collective values and individual values). Especially, the values contained in the African Ubuntu leadership model would help alleviate or eliminate the bad behaviours fuelled by the “corporate killers” or “faces of evil” that sustain a context of bad leadership.

### Ubuntu and Leadership

The Ubuntu philosophy indicates that Africans identify themselves through their communities of belonging. This confirms the following popular saying: “One for all, all for one”. Therefore, the community provides to Africans the seminal organisation to exercise leadership. In other words, the values acquired or learnt inside one’s community could help build a leadership capacity to display in a bigger organisation or a multicultural context.

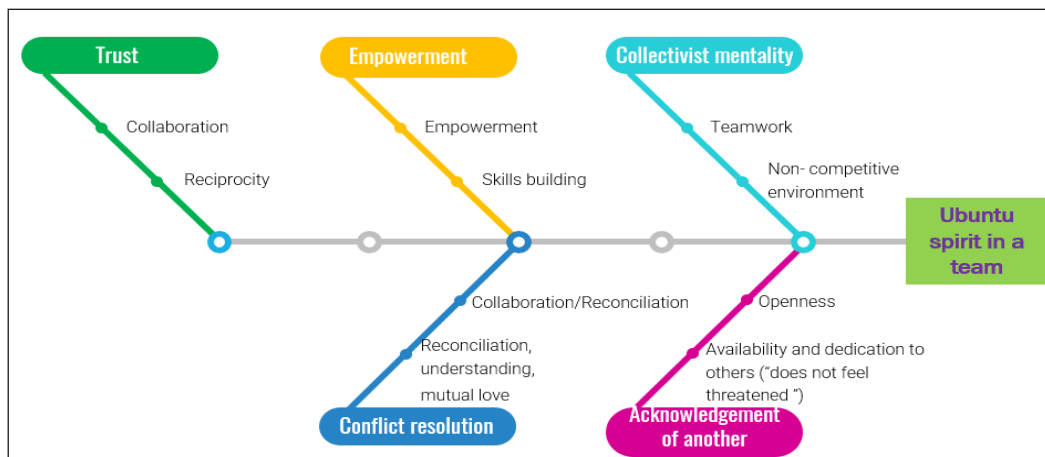
In project management, a team is created for the implementation of the project in view of achieving the project objectives and performance. A team is assumably a community managed by a leader within a given organisation. Consequently, any bigger settings could assumably be structured in many Ubuntu-like teams or communities.

### Determinants of the Ubuntu Leadership Style

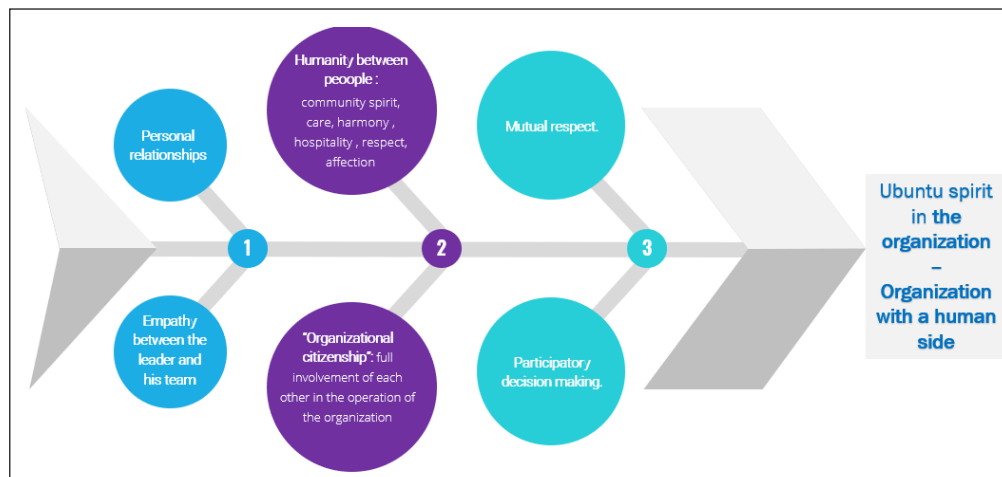
The “African Ubuntu” style, with a consensus score of 90.91%, was accepted as the appropriate leadership role model (Mboule, 2021), because it is founded on communal relationships, cooperative participation, solidarity, sharing a way of life, care, serving the community, trust, etc.

Nkomo (2006) indicates that Ubuntu involves teamwork, attention to personal relationships, mutual respect and empathy between the leader and his team members, and participative decision-making. In an organisation “with a human side”, with Ubuntu, individuals and groups demonstrate for each other “humaneness”. Humaneness is a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness: the behaviours that individuals and groups display for one another (Mangaliso, 2001, as cited by Nkomo, 2006).

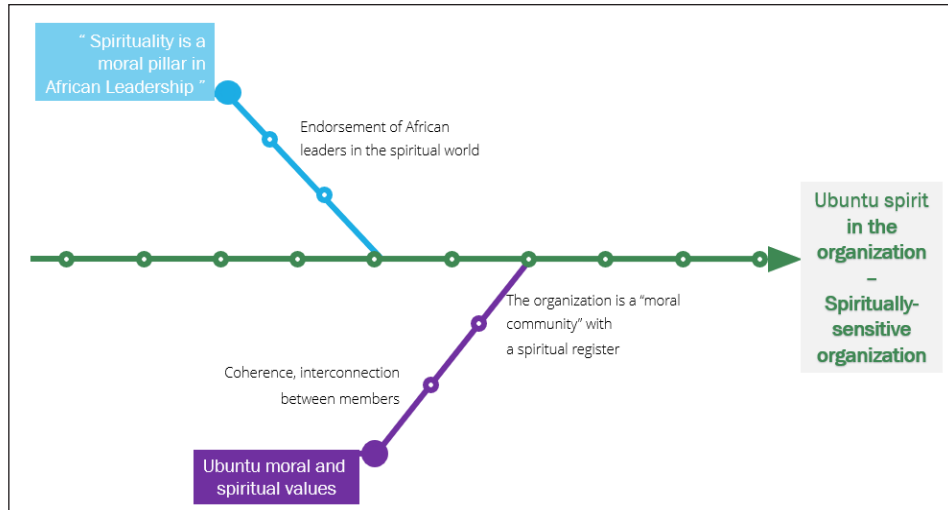
The determinants of the Ubuntu leadership style would influence a team and an organisation in the following ways: (i) creating an Ubuntu spirit in a team (Fig. 8), (ii) creating an organisation with a “human side” (Fig. 9) and (iii) making an organisation spiritually sensitive (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 8: Ubuntu Spirit in a Team**



**Fig. 9: Ubuntu Spirit in an Organization with a “Human Side”**



**Fig 10: Ubuntu Spirit in a Spiritually Sensitive Organization**

### Determinants of the Effectiveness of the Ubuntu Leadership Style

The effectiveness of leadership, according to Yukl (2006), relies upon the group influence process, i.e. the extent to which team members trust each other and cooperate in the accomplishment of task objectives. In a recent study, Mboule (2020) identified the following characteristics of an effective team (Fig. 11):

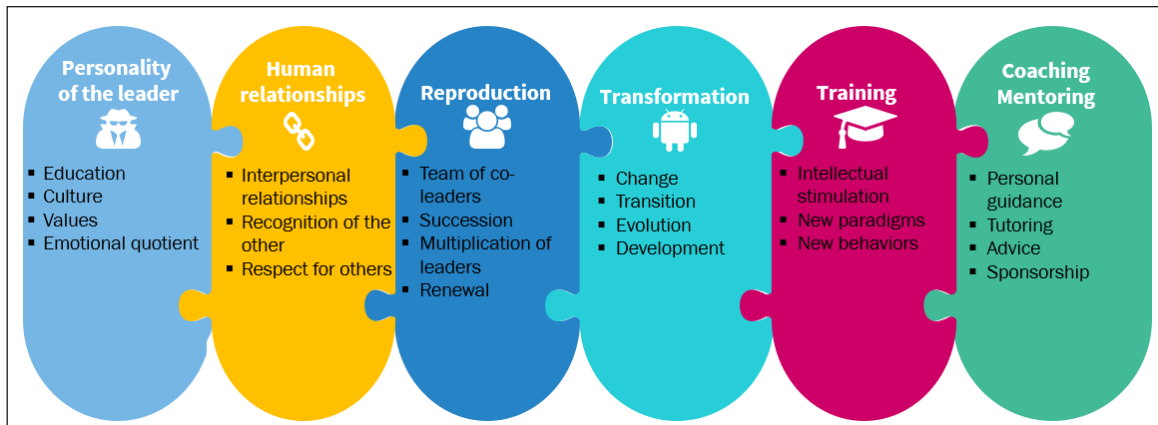
- A good organisation, as the foundation of the team.
- The four pillars: the links between the members, the roles of each one, the strengths of each one and the operating rules.
- A common target, as the “roof” of the team “house”.



**Fig. 11: Characteristics of an Effective Team**

In the African context, building an effective team also requires identifying how the Ubuntu mind would find the related leadership style effective. In the study, Mboule (2020) found the following determinants of the African Ubuntu leadership effectiveness (Fig. 12):

- *Personality of the Leader*: The leader’s personality results from his education, culture, values, and emotional quotient.
- *Human Relationships*: Human relationships involve interpersonal relationships, recognition of the other, and respect of others.
- *Reproduction*: This concerns the team members as co-leaders (pro-leaders), the preparation for succession in the leadership, and the multiplication and renewal of leaders.
- *Transformation*: Transformation includes change (external adaptability), transition (internal to the organisation), evolution, and development.
- *Training*: Training concerns intellectual stimulation, discovery of new paradigms, and adoption of new behaviours.
- *Coaching and Mentoring*: Coaching and mentoring involve personal guidance, and tutoring of team members, and advice and sponsoring to team members.



**Fig. 12: Determinants of the African Ubuntu Leadership Effectiveness**

## Conclusion

The title of this article, “Re-appropriating the Ubuntu Leadership Style,” denotes the avoidance of commonly used terms like “renaissance”, “resurrection”, or “back to the roots.” Other terms such as “re-appropriation” or “restoration” look more convenient to explain the author’s mindset. From their education and experience, many Africans have realised that Western paradigms and theories do not produce the tremendous changes expected. These Western paradigms have even failed in promoting and fostering humanism, humaneness, or human excellence. Therefore, in deconstructing the mental patterns acquired from Western education, it appears that new paradigms can emerge from the restoration of the African philosophical worldview. Research works show that the Ubuntu philosophy appears as the universal humanistic and humane approach Africa offers to the world as a heritage (Mbigi, 1997, as cited by Sigger, Polak & Pennink, 2010).

## Adoption of the African Ubuntu Leadership Style

The Ubuntu philosophy is undoubtedly the foundation of the African heritage in modern management thinking because it helps to improve the management of people and human relations. According to Karsten and Illa (2001), “Ubuntu will show a way to work together and create a diversified mentality (“rainbow”) in our organisations; a mentality characterised by a high degree of cultural, racial, religious, tribal, and political tolerance”.

To adopt the Ubuntu leadership principles and values that constitute the essence of this study, the following indications appear to be of utmost importance:

- You must start by changing your mindset to anchor it to the principles of Ubuntu.
- You must see yourself first as a member of a community before seeing yourself as a facilitator instead of a team leader.
- Facilitation, consultation, coordination, and promotion must be the key elements that guide interventions.

With the Ubuntu spirit, successes and failures must be the responsibility of the whole team, as well as the possible solutions to overcome failures. Besides, humility must be one of the main features of the Ubuntu leader. The Ubuntu leader must do advocacy work to change the vision, mission, and values of the organisation, and embrace the principles of Ubuntu.

## Perspectives

The choice of an appropriate leadership style could appear critical in communities, organisations, and society. Because leadership effectiveness is at stake, the following aphorism undoubtedly makes clear its necessity: “If you think effective leadership is expensive, try bad leadership” (adapted from Foote & Yoder, 2022, by the author).

The practical application of the African Ubuntu leadership style would start within the family or community -

considered as the smallest unit of society - or in a team, - considered as the smallest unit of an organisation. The author recommends that the African Ubuntu leadership style should be widely expanded through the empirical rule of “concentric circles”: from the family, as the innermost circle of the society, to the nation, as the biggest inclusive circle, through the successive circles that are the family clan, the village community, the tribe, the ethnic group and the people. From a team in an organisation, the African Ubuntu leadership style should be expanded in a business sector and, beyond, to the global country’s economic structure.

The African Ubuntu leadership style could be taught in organisational leadership courses in academic institutions or professional training institutes. As a leadership role model that seems demanded, it could be proven that it improves the performance of teams and organisations, as well as the transformation of organisations, institutions, and societies.

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