leadership

Leadership and ICT:

a catalyst for business success in Africa

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ABSTRACT: The winds of change that continue to blow across the business world call for effective leadership and well-managed ICT deployment within all sectors of an organisation's value chain. Against this backdrop, this piece attempts to bring to the fore the complex environment in which business leaders find themselves, especially in Africa, and how ICT can be harnessed to overcome and also fast-track business success. Some qualities of a good leader in the implementation and diffusion of ICT are also discussed. The article highlights the growing trend in next-generation concept in ICT-orientated graduate business education programmes and how best Africa can improve its education curriculum in terms of leadership training.

The world of business is more complex than ever before. Economies are inter-dependent. The environment is vulnerable. The poor grow in numbers each and every day, especially in Africa and as citizens of this world, businesses face serious dilemmas and greater responsibilities. The business of business has changed throughout the ages. The products have changed; the theories to explain it all have changed; but the underlying reasons for conducting business are as constant as the basic needs for survival. Though the world of business is democratic, it is also competitive. The more skills and talents you can bring with you into the marketplace, the better the opportunity you will have to succeed.

Though we are in Africa, we live and do business in a global marketplace that is becoming increasingly competitive. The intensifying competition for resources and demand for high performance are pressing firms to become more flexible, more results-focused and faster-acting. Companies are finding that such initiatives require able and visionary

leadership, and the challenge for organisations is to help build effective leadership both in the next generation of business leaders and throughout the organisation today.

This is especially evident in the information and communication technology (ICT) industry, where today's new technology is often being improved upon before it has even hit the retail shelves. Knowing the marketplace and being able to determine and take advantage of trends in ICT use are fundamental to business success.

However, this success can only be maintained through effective leadership and sound management practices that are directed towards enhancing a business's competitive advantage. The greater use of ICT is also enabling a wide range of businesses to become more competitive and global players. Whatever business one is in, technology can make it better because advances in ICT are transforming, creating new products and production methods, streamlining business processes and opening up new export markets.

Technology can improve efficiency and lower costs; increase your understanding of your clients, suppliers and partners; and improve your communications. This means better customer service, access to new markets, growth and greater profits. Recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) studies suggest that successful new economy businesses are strong in information and communications technology infrastructure, innovation systems, business environment and human resource development.

There are many products in the market which are designed to make doing business easier. These include software, hardware, services and communications solutions. There are a number of levels of e-business, ranging from simple Internet and e-mail access to having a website with e-business facilities, such as online ordering and payment systems. It is up to an effective business leader not only to choose the best out of a pile of ICT technologies available on the market, but to work with a team in their implementation and diffusion in order to achieve better results.

Research has established that good leaders are made, not born. If one has the desire and willpower, one can become an effective leader. Good leaders develop through a never-ending process of self-study, education, training and experience. For an effective leader to inspire his people to higher levels of teamwork, there are certain things he must be, know and do. These do not come naturally, but are acquired through continual work and study.

LEADERS *VS* MANAGERS. Many theorists have done extensive research on the differences between leaders and managers. In his book, *A Force for Change*, John Kotter clearly outlines them. In terms of agenda, structure and

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execution, those differences look something like this to him: when creating an agenda, managers plan steps, timelines, budgets and resources, while leaders establish direction and vision. Those leaders also work to align people behind that vision, as managers organise structure and staff, and establish procedures to monitor the implementation of the agenda. When it comes to execution, a manager's role is to minimise deviations and help produce predictable results. Leaders, on the other hand, energise employees and equip them with the right tools to help them overcome those obstacles.

LEADERSHIP: WHAT IS IT? Leadership is a complex process by which a person influences others to accomplish a mission, task or objective, and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent.

A person carries out this process by applying his leadership attributes (belief, values, ethics, character, knowledge and skills). Although one's position as a manager, supervisor, leader, etc gives one the authority to accomplish certain tasks and objectives in the organisation, this power does not make one a leader – it simply makes one the boss.

Leadership makes people want to achieve high goals and objectives, while, on the other hand, bosses tell people to accomplish a task or objective.

LEADERSHIP AND ICT. One distinguishing characteristic of great leaders which research has brought to light is an intense

leadership

focus on what their organisations need to do well, and know what they should not be doing at all, by developing this into a blueprint for the organisation. In keeping with this single-mindedness, outstanding leaders implement ICT at three levels in order to stay ahead of competition.

The first level is to consider those technologies that are directly relevant or fundamental to an organisation's core mission. For any organisation, few technologies hold the potential of substantially improving operations and results. If business leaders become very clear about the few things

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they ought to be doing, there will not be a myriad of ICT tools to choose from. This helps to narrow the search for ICT tools, hence it is the responsibility of the business leader to ensure that the organisation invests in the appropriate ICT.

Those two or three technologies then become the top priorities for leaders. In implementing these carefully selected ICT tools, it is always prudent for business leaders to become pioneers in their application. If business leaders really want to be great, it is not good enough to be at the threshold or periphery when ICT is being implemented within an organisation.

The second types of technologies are those that lack revolutionary potential, but which are needed by organisations anyway. For some companies, websites fall in this category. In this "web world", business leaders have to get at least a passably usable and up-to-date website, because there are certain tags that people have grown to put on companies without a functional website.

Thirdly, there are some technologies that are nothing more than a distraction. Though one may not want them because they do not tie directly into the corporate mission, it is better to put these technologies on the waiting list, even if the whole world is heading towards them. However, one needs to be very meticulous in arriving at such a decision. In this sense, a leader has to know when to forgo an advantage in order to gain a more important one later.

A technology worth nothing yesterday could easily become the cornerstone of the business today.

In sum, good technology implementation is important for a company, but being a good company is even more important. The best technology implementers are visionary leaders. We should not forget the fact that the next generation of business leaders is coming from ICT, not from finance or marketing. It is in this vein that one is called upon to answer this question: what business problem do you know of that is not being solved by technology?

It is against this backdrop that a next-generation concept in graduate business education programmes, ie the MSc/MBA, targets aspiring business leaders and entrepreneurs. What is especially encouraging is that these intensive dual-degree programmes which integrate an MBA with an MSc degree in an IT-related discipline are being offered by a growing number of universities. The University of Delaware, the University of Michigan, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of San Diego, Creighton University and Loyola University are among them. This programme has been tailored to respond to the digital revolution's impact on organisations, fusing a traditional business administration and management curriculum with expertise in the IT systems that have fundamentally changed business strategies and operations. All these initiatives are based on the premise that business leaders should be at the centre of aligning business strategy with IT objectives and capabilities.

It is to this effect that Africa, as a continent should cultivate "values", "thought", "action" and "visionary" leaders. Values leaders are individuals who are aware that the actions of business affect many different groups, and that often these groups do not share common interests. The "right thing" for an executive decision-maker is defined both by personal values and also by the multiplicity of interests affected by a decision. Values leaders also know that working for a company means serving the community in which that business exists and functions. They build coalitions that unite instead of artificial barriers that divide. They make decisions within a context of global and social impact, and they do well by doing good. Leaders do not work in a vacuum. Trusted employees, tenacious consultants and aggressive

competitors jockey to inform and influence every administrator's opinion.

Thought leaders also examine questions without reducing their intricacies. They weigh tomorrow's consequences against today's solutions. They can see both the woods and the trees, and they run the companies most likely to succeed in our uncertain economy. Action leaders accomplish great things with a good idea. They can build momentum and manage expectation. They recognise potential, actualise possibilities and are not afraid to challenge old assumptions in order to set new standards. Leaders bear the responsibility for guiding a host of constituents towards the accomplishment of an overarching goal. All these require a solid grounding in a vision that guides the leader and, ultimately, the organisation towards better performance.

There is no inertia in business. If the business is not moving forward, then the leader is failing. Again, in a world of business, firms win or lose: leaders come and go.

Unlike sport, where one can toil in minor leagues for life, business has no minor league: you lose, and you are out. A visionary leader therefore needs to prioritise tactics, mobilise resources and motivate team members, while communicating objectives and combining the latest ICT tools in order to get this done.

THE WAY FORWARD. Africa should educate values, thought, action and visionary leaders. These are leaders who have the ability to translate solutions into actions. In this light, our governments should liaise with consultancies and NGOs in building skills development programmes and developing local capacities that would create an environment and culture for leaders to enhance their leadership capabilities. The leadership and skills development programmes should focus on developing eight core competencies: strategic thinking, influencing, leading, thinking globally, championing change, utilising judgement, building relationships, and managing disagreements.

Modelled after corporate leadership development initiatives, the programmes could use assessments, one-on-one counselling, role-plays, mock interviews, speaker series by ICT-orientated, successful business leaders, and other techniques to build leadership, communication, teamwork and career management skills.

Our educational curriculum should nurture thought leaders – individuals who can successfully synthesise multiple and, sometimes, conflicting-agendas into a cogent, strategic plan to achieve their goals by infusing ICT into their solutions.

Our teaching programmes, especially in our tertiary institutions, should exploit our unique gradual positioning in the world as a promising emerging market and our track record of managing our own and highly competitive multinational firms. Our governments should provide a vibrant

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environment for our ICT business leaders to master innovation and entrepreneurship.

There are many other opportunities available to the African business leader with the use of ICT. However, African business leaders must be mentally ahead and on top of issues confronting their organisation. This will also help them make an informed choice when selecting ICT tools. We, as a continent, should create the enabling environment by supporting our business leaders in focusing on their career while they also challenge themselves, expand their networks and have fun.

However, our business leaders should not forget the fact that ICT is the enabler.

The longevity and success of companies are a testament to the ability of their leaders to take advantage of opportunities created by ICT as they arose, and to create opportunities where none existed.

The basis of good leadership is honourable character and selfless service to one's organisation. In the employees' eyes, one's leadership is everything one does that affects the organisation's objectives and their well-being. A respected leader concentrates on what he is (beliefs and character), what he knows (job, tasks, human nature), and what he does (implement, motivate, provide direction). ∎

Reference:

Kotter, JP (1990). *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs From Management*, Free Press, New York, ISBN: 0029184657.