



THE DARK SIDE OF UBUNTU

Traditionally Ubuntu refers to that which makes us human...but it has a shadow too.

THE AFRICANISATION of management-speak has emerged as a proud aspect of our renaissance. This includes the substitution of African words for English ones (meetings become indabas); African animals being cited as business archetypes; and, more substantially, introducing aspects of African culture as free-standing management philosophies in their own right. Ubuntu is perhaps the best example and has been a hit with local change practitioners and management boffs, happy to find an African word and conceptual basis for something sorely lacking in the average workplace: a spirit of humility, co-operation, generosity and inclusiveness. Traditionally, ubuntu refers to that which makes us human and distinct from the world of animals. Based on a strong sense of community and respect for others, its advocates place it at the heart of African culture, representing the antithesis of rampantly self-serving public limited companies that for so long have sucked the life-blood from communities, workers and the planet in the interests of ever-increasing shareholder returns.

A little too wonderful

I have a small niggle about ubuntu-as-business-philosophy. It is similar to the niggle I get when reading social responsibility reports that reflect the number of schools a company has helped or orphans they've fed. There are a whole lot of not-so-glowing things the company inevitably leaves out of the report – understandably of course, for what company would voluntarily make public those things of which they are not proud? I am talking of the shadow stuff: those unspoken assumptions, dysfunctional hierarchies, externali-

ties and quiet lies that comprise the working pathology that underpins much of corporate life. These are things many of us know and tacitly accept, because despite the inequalities, waste, violence and corruption, modern society appears to have provided more choices, comfort, travel, democracy and human indulgences than ever before. That we choose complicity, as consumers, employees or car-owners, is an aspect of our own shadow.

There's a shadow side to ubuntu too. Respectful communalism involves more than humility, co-operation and generosity to others. Unlike hunter-gatherer societies that lived in harmony with nature, agro-pastoral societies introduced the notion of ownership and accumulation, and wars to moderate it. Over time, developing trade networks gave rise to great African empires bringing the need for new social technologies, hierarchies and forms of control. A reading of pre-industrial African history suggests that while humility and generosity of spirit were an important aspect of culture, they existed in a context that included their antithesis. I am not saying this is good or bad – it is simply the evolution of culture. I am suggesting respectfully that ubuntu-management may be a little selective in its recent re-imagining.

The hidden jewel

The engagement of industrial cultures with pre-industrial ones appears to follow a predictable trajectory. The first selective lens sees primarily the dark side: witchcraft, blood sacrifice, frightening rituals and frenzied possession states. Profoundly challenging to Western rationality, these practices validated colonial attempts to destroy, denigrate or legislate indigenous cultures into obscurity. When the tables are

turned, institutions in post-colonial or newly democratic Africa see the same culture through another lens: communalism, humility and respect. Conceptually, these lenses are equally problematic (though the former was obviously more problematic from an ethical point of view).

The problem is that selective readings of African culture, however well-intentioned, are unavoidably blind to a key aspect of indigenous wisdom. In my opinion, the real jewel of agro-pastoral knowledge and one which our technocratic culture would do well to heed, was about balance. They recognised when they were out of balance with nature and undertook serious steps to restore it.

Human-ness (ubuntu) required a constant movement towards balance (between people and nature, chaos and order, past and future); balance required a coming to fullness, which implied that all aspects be revealed – the dark as well as the light. When balance was compromised, normal community life stopped. Rituals were enacted. In a process usually facilitated by a sangoma (ritual specialists) balance was restored, whatever the cost in blood, sweat or tears.

The cost of technocracy

Our technocratic society has lost this knowledge. We still seek to control nature, rather than balance with it; we have entire industries based on spinning selective truths; and despite incontrovertible scientific evidence regarding our society's critical imbalance with nature, we lack the social ability to stop the machine. Our politicians and leaders (and many of us) lack the will to look reality in the face and act accordingly. Despite our modern comforts and luxuries, we have lost a crucial aspect of human wisdom gained in our agro-pastoral past, and it will cost us dearly. Although an important part of the African renaissance, ubuntu is in danger of falling into the selective trap it purports to correct. It acts as a filter, enabling us to continue denying those things we'd rather not see that take us well beyond our comfort zone. Witchcraft, blood sacrifice and life-threatening initiations did not exist because Africans were superstitious. They were there because they

brought into consciousness the shadow side of humanity. As Jung famously said: "One does not become enlightened by imagining light, but by making the darkness conscious." I am not advocating a return to ritual sacrifice, truth-tellings or trance dancing (although under some circumstances, they may have their uses). I am suggesting that a movement towards balance requires us to seek a contemporary expression of those cultural practices that sought the fullness of humanity by revealing its depths. Without bringing to light the waste, the chronic work-life imbalance, the profiteering and complacency, the tokenism and denial, these shadows will continue to play just below the surface of corporate consciousness. They may be revealed unconsciously (and expensively) in corporate scandals, but for the most part they will continue to undermine the fullness of our human journey.

Deepening our understanding of ubuntu

Our challenge is to develop the capacity to track, and the courage to reveal, the real extent to which human, social and natural capital are built or destroyed by our business activities. Although we have developed complex accounting systems for financial capital, we still lack viable indicators for tracking our interactions with the community and nature. Such indicators were fundamental to the stability of pre-industrial African cultures. It was this relentless pursuit of conscious balance that brought the tenacity, creativity, adaptability and flexibility of these cultures. These traits are increasingly regarded as the cornerstones of business resilience in today's complex, changing world. We have learnt phenomenal things from our technocratic adventure, but we cannot afford to learn if we do so by forfeiting the knowledge of the past. Without bringing out the shadow side that is essential for balance, ubuntu is in danger of being appropriated as an African word for business as usual, with a few feel-good stories, perhaps a praise-singer and a corporate indaba or two. If business is going to do the African thing, I'm hoping we find the guts to engage with her fullness. ■