

**“The reported integration of sustainability targets, however good the metrics and however accurate the reporting, does not guarantee that a company is making a net positive contribution across the triple bottom line of sustainable development.”**

» sustainable development.” While conventional wisdom may have it that company disclosures on sustainability performance reflect the actual degree to which companies are achieving true sustainability on the ground, it is most certainly not always the true reflection of the status quo.

For example, on paper the bank’s aggregated statistics on transformation look good. However, look closer and you will notice the board comprises 17 directors, of whom only two are women and non-executive. Lest we forget, South Africa is a country where women make up 56% of the total population. While Nedbank must be commended for its leadership in corporate reporting in its sector, it should look at rectifying the following next time round:

The bank spends a great deal of shareholder funds to finance so-called investments in Corporate Social Investment (CSI). If financing CSI-related activities constitutes an investment, how are the returns on that investment calculated? - The report does not give one the sense that

Nedbank is translating the disclosures into measurable actions. Third party verifiers need to provide the stakeholders with more qualitative and quantitative assurances regarding the implementation of the reported aspects - The report tends to be more qualitative and procedural than quantitative and substantive. This, to some extent, is a sign of a disconnection between corporate policies and the ‘operationalisation’ of sustainability that is required. - Greater courage is called for in being transparent on some of the tougher issues, such as gender parity at board level, and to engage all stakeholders in the challenge to find enduring solutions. On the whole, Nedbank’s sustainability story thus far is both exemplary and encouraging. The bank may not be the largest bank in the nation but it is certainly the leader of the pack where the sustainability agenda is concerned. One can only hope that previous achievements will be consolidated to give more credence to the bank’s slogan, ‘Making things happen’. ■

## AFRICAN INCITE:

# tradition, resistance and change

Change often encounters resistance, but African traditions offer a number of tools for embracing resistance as a force for change. **Words: Nicola Robins**

**O**ur president’s call for a return to African values is hampered by the pressing demands of a changing world. Symbolic actions are one thing: slaughtering a cow on one’s doorstep is messy, but can be done quickly, allowing one to proceed with the business of modern living right away. When it comes down to it, traditions are inevitably associated with conservatism and being stuck in the past.

My engagement with African tradition has led me to believe otherwise. Indigenous traditions of pre-industrial cultures were brimming with technologies for working with change.

The reason is simple: these cultures lived close to the land. Humanity emerged from a need to balance with nature’s relentless dy-

namism, and a society unable to respond quickly to change was doomed. Jared Diamond calls it ‘ecocide’ and his recent book *Collapse* lists numerous societies that succumbed to their mistaken assumptions about natural resources.

Industrial technologies obscured our relationship to the land; but our burgeoning population has led us inexorably back there, to the point where our activities are increasingly directed by natural limits. We concern ourselves with conserving traditions to honour the past. I am wondering whether we should be re-examining traditions because they contain technologies of change needed to help us adapt to our future.

Change requires energy and so we resist it. A brief survey at work will confirm that spare energy these days is in

short supply. Some of us manage to trick our adrenals into overdrive by engaging with stimulants or extreme sports, but most of us are exhausted. We barely have enough energy to get kids to school, let alone deal with petulant global climate patterns.

Comfortingly, it seems ancient folk weren’t that different from us modern humans. Many of the indigenous technologies used to seek balance comprise methods to accrue personal energy. They may have lacked our particular brand of burn-out, but it is clear they also required a boost to face the relentlessness of natural change.

A crucial difference between pre- and post-industrial cultures appears in our response to resistance. We tend to see change happening when resistance to our



plans is reduced, denied or wiped out. African approaches to change appear to engage with resistance itself, allowing something unpredictable to emerge in the process.

I would much rather do yoga, pop a Prozac, kick the dog or switch on Quentin Tarantino’s celluloid violence than engage my resistance to change head-on. In other words, I would rather reduce the pressure to keep my dysfunctional system going, than yield to the knowledge that I do not

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control its outcome.

In contrast, indigenous approaches put resistance increasingly under pressure. This invariably expresses in rising temperatures, which is incidentally how a star is formed. It is not incidental actually: change is an alchemical process and resistance contains the seed of our creativity, of something new. As the Chinese proverb says: "When in hot water, take a bath."

In this regard, our prevailing business model is the 'change programme':

management hires consultants to identify the right levers to pull to ensure everyone accepts and enacts their plans with minimum resistance and at maximum speed. There are performance indicators and incentives. The more enlightened companies include smiles, bonuses and wellness centres.

Judging by the research, such change initiatives rarely if ever meet expectations. In his analysis of corporate change efforts, Harvard's John Kotter notes that

a few have been successful, a few have been utter failures, and most fall somewhere in between with "a distinct tilt towards the lower end of the scale". Whichever way we look at it, finding leverage points for change is extremely challenging.

If we brought forward the knowledge of traditional African communities, how might we approach change differently? Bearing in mind that we don't have time to sit chatting for hours under the marula tree.

Turns out, the morula tree is rather important. Change is driven or impeded not only by action, but by interaction: the quality of dialogue taking place between people, within the community and beyond it. It emerges from ongoing relationships and collective will. It is fed by energy harnessed both from inspiration and emerging from resistance.

African technologies of change focus on accruing the personal energy



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needed to surrender control under pressure, without losing integrity. It doesn't mean we give up our plans – it means finding ways to focus and harness energy, rather than wrestling the organisation into submission.

Here are some of the change management tools used in African traditions:

► **HONOUR THE ANCESTORS.** Listen to the wisdom of the community (or organisation); make its context clear. Before you fiddle, understand the forces and structures that help the system run itself.

► **DANCE.** Find organisational resonance. Get the beat, sweat; involve your body, not just your mind.

► **COMMUNICATE.** Most of what goes wrong is a result of miscommunication, inadequate listening or missing information.

► **DEEPEN INSIGHT.** Learn to integrate information from vastly different sources: sensory, rational, intuitive, imaginative. Listen to what is important, not just to what is quantifiable.

► **TELL THE TRUTH.** Expose thoughts, resistance and mental models. Establish a forum that allows things to be heard, honoured and laughed at. Let shadows emerge. Hold the tension; never take

your eye off its potential.

► **MEDICINE.** Learn to track energy in the organisation and direct it to where it is useful. Energy may come from a person, location or any set of interactions. If you are unable to do this for yourself, don't try to do it for your organisation.

► **TRANCE.** Expand your own time and thought horizons. See yourself and the system from the outside, from a bigger perspective.

In harnessing resistance as a force for change, we become aware of the diversity around us. When we find the compassion to celebrate this diversity, our efforts to change begin to bear fruit and a magnificent unity emerges. In African communities this paradox was honoured by dancing and feasting; in business, we tick the box called 'transformation'.

If we have the courage to do these things, our embrace of African traditions will go way beyond the realm of symbolism. ■



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