

## **MANAGEMENT TALENT WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE IN AFRICA**

### **Tony Manning**

Of all the challenges facing Africa – and there are many – the most important of all is the development of tomorrow’s managers. Without them, little of consequence is possible. Bold plans will turn to dust. Talk of an African Renaissance will come to nothing. The millennium Africa Plan will be stillborn.

Worldwide, organizations are in a war for talent. They hunt far and wide for people with knowledge, skills, and experience. Africa is a rich field for them.

Their task is made easier by the fact that so many people are eager to leave this great continent. Factors such as war, famine, poverty, Aids, and corruption all drive smart individuals away. Many also see a lack of opportunity here, and wish to earn hard currency.

For any organization to work, it needs a critical mass of competent managers. In a small company or department that might mean just one person who know how to make things happen. In a big business it could mean dozens or even hundreds of them.

When this competence is missing, trouble is assured. Work is not organized, controlled, or monitored. Methods don’t improve. People are not coached and helped to improve their performance. Teams fall apart.

It’s tempting to argue that people can think for themselves, that they will do what’s necessary without bosses looking over their shoulders. And yes, participative management, empowerment and teamwork are hot issues in “world class” organizations, so why not in Africa.

But to take this tack is to ignore the facts. And the facts are that for all the need and the efforts to push responsibility as far down the line as possible, and for all the logic in sharing decision-making and responsibility, leadership is essential. And everyone cannot be the leader.

There are good reasons that the most effective companies everywhere still have chief executives and heads of functions such as finance, human resources, manufacturing, marketing, and so on. There are good reasons, too, that for all the talk about “flat” structures, most successful firms are hierarchies with several layers between the top and the bottom. The fact is, these practices *work*.

Of course, there are exceptions. But they are few and far between. And surely it makes no sense – especially when time is tight and the need to get results is great – to experiment or to try and reinvent the wheel. Best practices in management are universal. Companies in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America use the same ideas in their quest for performance. Learning from them is more logical than trying to cook up some homegrown theory that may or may not work.

The task of a leader is to create a context in which others will perform to their potential. A context, in other words, that brings out their “magic”. For this to happen, two things are necessary.

First, the leader must ensure that they know where they’re going. He or she must show them “the hill” they’re to seize, or they will travel in different directions and their efforts will be wasted.

Second, the leader must drive performance. Showing people which way to aim is not enough. They must know exactly what is expected of them. They must be encouraged and supported, pushed and measured.

If this sounds tough-minded, it is. Performance doesn't happen when it's left to chance or to the whim of those who are supposed to perform. Momentum is lost in no time at all.

Winning companies are not social clubs. They set high standards, expect exceptional performance, and constantly measure results. They are inspiring to work in, but intolerant of those who don't deliver.

Across Africa today, companies talk glibly of being world class. Most have no idea what this means, or what they must do to get there. Executives assume that by tossing around comments about "core competence", "benchmarking", "generic strategy" or "strategic intent" they will somehow change things. But they won't. All they will get is more confusion and more poor results.

The basics of business have been well known for decades. Now is the time to apply them. Organizations of every size need urgently to learn about the tools that work, and management must get on with the hard work of delivering performance instead of hot air.

Companies fail mostly because they fool themselves. The winners are thoroughly practical, systematic and hands-on – and above all, tough on themselves. This is what real leadership is about.

Growing, keeping, and leveraging talent should be our No.1 priority. But making sure that tomorrow's leaders have the toolkit they need comes a close second.

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