



Geci Karuri-Sebina
Written Assignment, 14 August 2009
2009 Archbishop Tutu Fellowship Programme

Who's more unique: Our Followers or Leaders? EARLY REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

all of us will be followers more often than we will be leaders.

Faced with the daunting task of writing on the nature of African leadership, and already beginning to feel gloomy at the prospect based on the generally dismal state of affairs on the African socio-political scene, I started closer to home with a bit of navel-gazing. This led to a brief journey that ultimately [mis]guided me into considering the question of whether there is anything fundamentally unique about African *followership* practice rather than leadership practice? This editorial represents this unravelling and concludes rather unoriginally, but perhaps manages to point to a part of the “African leadership” discourse that is worth exploring further.

The “wanna be” follower-leader: Me

Some years ago, I decided that I did not want to be a leader – or at least that I no longer wanted to hold any positional leadership roles. Obviously this is not a decision one shares easily having applied to be a fellow in a prestigious leadership programme – but there it is, nonetheless.

But why this seemingly odd decision? In a nutshell, I had come to realise after having held greater and lesser leadership posts across a range of organisations since the age of ten that it was too difficult to drive change from the top. Ultimately, positional leadership – it seemed to me – was usually an opportunity for those who really could drive the process or change to defer to a scapegoat. I began to perceive the role of leader as a thankless and crippling seat. However it did give me pause to reflect on what might be done differently from the follower perspective in the situations. I decided that I would from then on focus on my personal leadership and “lead from the floor” as a dedicated follower. Not “dedicated” in the sense of swearing blind allegiance to a leader, but dedicated in that I would take seriously the task of pursuing what was required to achieve success in the organisation, and demand effectiveness and accountability from those who chose to “lead” formally.

What I found in reaction to my private decision when I began rejecting new or renewed opportunities to lead was that there was no respect for the answer “No, I don’t want to lead. I believe that I will service this organisation best as an active member or follower.” Leaders and members alike of organisations would castigate me for my negligence, selfishness, tentativeness, etc. and attempt to coerce me into the leadership role. Very few could appreciate the reason for – or potential of – my expression of a decision (and offer) to follow, and to follow well.

This memory got me thinking about the question of whether it is really our African leaders who are unique, or whether it is our followers. Two specific examples began to draw me beyond my fond navel-gazing...

The bad leader turned good: Daniel arap Moi

For 24 years, Mr. Moi ran Kenya. I was fairly certain that consensus had him down as a certified bad leader. The legacy his administration left by its overdue demise in 2002 was one of despotism, ethnocentrism, repression, corruption, human rights abuse, and reducing a promising nation to its knees.

Google M.O.1 now. Turns out he's a great leader – a Professor of Politics. The elaborate political system of "Moism" is coined and analysed. He has been a local and regional peace envoy (appointed by his ouster President Mwai Kibaki who referred dotingly to Moi's "stature as an elder statesman" and a "vast experience and knowledge of African affairs." He is apparently one of the comforting voices in a current crisis of leadership, he is cheered (not jeered as on the eve of his fall) and sometimes even a reflection of "good old days" in Kenya. I found myself less concerned about the "leader" himself, and more intrigued with the followers.

"Kenyans are famous for short memories. It is less than seven years since Moi left office but most people have forgotten the kind of person he was. These days, Moi gets cheers whenever he attends public gatherings. Moi has become a celebrity speaker at university graduations, weddings, funerals and state functions. As a keen manipulator of human emotions, Moi knows the right things to say to leave the crowd roaring in applause."

<http://nairobiChronicle.wordpress.com/2009/06/29/moi-makes-comeback-as-kenyans-yearn-for-sober-leadership/>

Case two –

The never-could-possibly-be-the-leader: Jacob Zuma

In April, Jacob Zuma rose against many odds and nay-sayers to become the 4th full president of the republic of South Africa. On a "path to presidency plagued by scandal," many concurred that he did not have the capacity, competence, or legitimacy to qualify him for this post. With a heavily tainted record of recent (and even current) allegations and accusations of rape, corruption and populism, most rational observers thought he couldn't possibly stand a chance.

Now, in analysing JZ's first 100 days in government, the critique is tempered down quite a bit and even his harshest critics appear to be softening to our new never-could-be-the-leader leader. He's getting top points on his willingness to listen, appointing a strong team, courage to acknowledge the big challenges in the country, and so far. At a time where the country is in recession and being simultaneously rattled by a range of protests over service delivery and labour disputes, callers on the radio shows are saying

"In my view it is a very positive sign that despite my critical voice, the president [Zuma] was keen to chat. This openness can only augur well for our country," Archbishop Tutu (August 7, 2009).
<http://www.news24.com/>

"...he is affable, humble and approachable. The personal tone of the presidency is open and friendly." Hellen Zille (SA Today, Democratic Alliance online newsletter, August 14 2009)

It is important to clarify that I am not trying to oversimplify the issue. I would acknowledge that there are circumstances that may favour particular leadership traits or other qualities of a Zuma, a Moi or a Hitler. The point I am leading to is that we have measured up leaders – good and bad in terms of their capability – in Africa. Their degree of goodness or badness appears not

to be the key indicator to watch for in terms of significance or uniqueness. I am convinced that any European, American, Indian or Chinese could behave similarly to a Mr. Moi or Mr. Zuma. Perhaps the common denominator – the mass followership which defers to these kinds of leaders – is the key? And that surely then puts a significant burden of responsibility on African followers too? Perhaps my decision to follow wasn't such an irrational one after all?

The concept of followership

I am getting used to the idea that I simply cannot seem to have a truly original thought, as refreshingly new as it often feels when I have my frequent epiphanies! Nothing new under the sun indeed. No sooner had I began Googling around to see if there was any thinking done on this topic, than I found that there are entire philosophies, movements, books and organisations on the topic: followership, the follower-centric approach to leadership, follower-leader relations. Well, a validation if nothing else.

From an initial scan of the literature, I found that the first recorded mention of followership was in 1967, and the concept was popularized in 1998 by Robert E. Kelley (Landino, 2006). However there is plenty of recent writing on the subject, a lot of it over the past few years marking it as a relatively new field of focus in leadership study. I did note that a lot of the literature appeared to emanate from defence-related organisations which are understandably eminently concerned with command-and-control forms of leadership. However, the analyses were robust and let us not forget that the military has pioneered research in a whole range of areas of great civilian relevance, including in the area of leadership (e.g. in foresight, psychology, culture, socio-technical systems, etc.).

Effective followers are defined in terms of various qualitative characteristics (Landino):

Interestingly, effective followers share many of the same characteristics as effective leaders. As a result, cultivating followership skills can be an excellent way to become a more effective leader. Followership can also be called "leading up," "managing up," or "leading from the middle."
www.Govleaders.org

- "people who act with intelligence, independence, courage, and a strong sense of ethics"
- "individuals with high organizational commitment who are able to function well in a change-oriented team environment. Additionally, they are independent, critical thinkers with highly developed integrity and competency. Thus, effective followers exhibit loyalty to the [leader] by endorsing organizational vision and priorities."

Kelley, who was a prominent social scientist in followership studies, additionally identified two behavioral dimensions for determining follower effectiveness: critical thinking and participation. It is useful to consider the extent to which African followership (nation citizenry, organisational staff, civil servants, etc.) can be considered to demonstrate these, as opposed to the "sheep" or "yes man" categories.

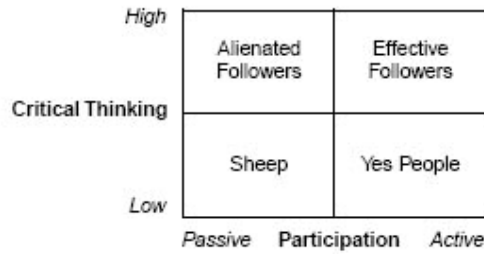


Figure 1: Follower Types (Robert E. Kelley, 1996, "In Praise of Followers")

Without wanting to seem rude, it probably does not take much saying to generally characterize where African followership is likely to be located in this logic if one were to undertake an analysis. Common traits of deference, patronage, cronyism, survivalism, short-termism, etc. would likely counter against scoring in the higher order.

Kelley stated that "in this state of overhonoring a leader, followers can open themselves up to potential abuse" and he warns against the "romantic illusion" view of leadership which creates leaders who are "overawed by their subjects." As I read this, I thought of the vast African lore that elevate and mystifies the births and personal history of leaders – and even leader-tribes. Positions of leadership appear to anoint African leaders not with the prickly weight of responsibility, but with the gluttonous privileges of deity. Paradoxically, the more you have, the more you deserve. Advisors become jesters, overseers become defenders, citizen-accountable become servants, rampant accumulation of wealth evidence of entitlement, and aggression the proof of power. Ironic.

My budding argument is that this is as much about the followership's subscription and commitment to the "romantic illusion" as it is about the takers of the luscious offer.

Indeed this would make any focus on followership wholly insignificant.

Some thoughts for further exploration

Finally, I took a first stab at a rough mapping of some principles of good leadership (Sean Lance, 2009) against proposed rules of good followership (P.S. Meilinger, 2001, "The Ten Rules of Good Followership") although the latter set was more instrumental than strategic. The intention was to begin exploring the synergistic qualities of good leadership and good citizenship if indeed both are required for effectiveness.

	Principle of good leadership (Lance, 2009)	Corresponding principle of good followership? (Meilinger, 2001)
1.	Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make the decision, then run it past the Leader; use your initiative.
2.	Courage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fight with your Leader if necessary; but do it in private, avoid embarrassing situations, and never reveal to others what was discussed. Keep your Leader informed of what's going on in the unit;
3.	Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't blame your Leader for an unpopular decision or policy; your job is to support, not undermine. If you see a problem, fix it. Don't worry about who would have gotten the blame or who now gets the praise.

4.	The Pentecostal gift	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -
5.	Emotional switch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put in more than an honest day's work, but don't ever forget the needs of your family. If they are unhappy, you will be too, and your job performance will suffer accordingly.
6.	Reluctance to lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept responsibility whenever it is offered.
7.	<i>(Ethics)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell the truth and don't quibble; your Leader will be giving advice up the chain of command based on what you said.
8.	<i>(-)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do your homework; give your Leader all the information needed to make a decision; anticipate possible questions. When making a recommendation, remember who will probably have to implement it. This means you must know your own limitations and weaknesses as well as your strengths.

In his overview on "What is African Leadership?" (2006), Colin Hall claimed that appropriate approaches to leadership in the African context would result in "enthusiastic - even passionate – followership." Per the discussion presented in these early reflections, I am not convinced that the sequencing and causality of his proposition are quite right. Where exasperated claims that "African followership is... still in the thraldom of ignorance, superstition and timidity" (F. Ogbunwezeh, 2009) abound, I do not believe that the leadership crisis on the continent can be solved just by leaders – good or bad, unique or not. We have got to pay more attention to analysing and activating our **followership** so that this huge base can hold itself to account for the future prospects of a better Africa for all of us.

"Africa is a society that defers to leaders for direction and where followers surrender their power to leaders with no attempt to create an institutional framework to secure their interests.

We are simply in love with leadership and yet uncomfortable with followership while forgetting that the two are inseparable.

We rarely honor followership.

We often regard ourselves as helpless and weak and yet we have the power working together to create the kind of leaders that we deserve."

Mutumwa, M. (07/27/09). Africa 2009 – Leader-follower relationship – A required conversation, "The Zimbabwe Telegraph

References:

Landino, R.J. (2006). Followership: A Literature Review of a Rising Power Beyond Leadership.

Latour, S.M. & Rast, V.J. (2003). Dynamic Followership: The Prerequisite for Effective Leadership. Air & Space Power Journal, Winter 2004.

Meilinger, P.S. (2001). The Ten Rules of Good Followership.

Van Quaquebeke, N., Eckloff, T., Zenker, S. , & Giessner, S. (2009). Leadership is in the Eye. Themenschwerpunkt Personalführung 1/2009.

ATLP lectures

<http://www.africanloft.com>

<http://experts.foreignpolicy.com>

<http://govleaders.org>

<http://www.ltl.co.za>

<http://www.news24.com>

<http://www.zimtelegraph.com>

We must learn to follow before we can lead.