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Ken Kalala Ndalamba  
*Methodist University of Angola*, ndalambaken@gmail.com

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# **Leadership Ethos and Culturally Oriented Strategic Management: A Conceptual Framework and Research Propositions**

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**KEN KALALA NDALAMBA, PHD**  
**METHODIST UNIVERSITY OF ANGOLA**  
**LUANDA, ANGOLA**  
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It is widely acknowledged that no business, no organisation, no endeavour succeeds in the realisation of its objectives unless a proper and appropriate strategy has been put into place and successfully implemented (Caldwell & Anderson, 2017). In this respect, scholars and practitioners in recent decades have intensified debates and discussions particularly over the role of leadership (Anderson, et al., 2017; Peters & Martin, 2017) in establishing culturally-oriented strategic management (COSM) with a view of empowering businesses, organisations, and institutions across the sectors towards a successful realisation of the set objectives (Korey, 1985; Richardson, 1994; Firoz, et al., 2002; Bordum, 2010; Esau, 2016; Venkateswaran & Ojha, 2017). In fact, looking at the issue from an organisational learning (OL) perspective, Trim and Lee (2007: 336) argue that, “Organisational learning is influential with respect to facilitating the development of an organisation’s value system and ultimately its culture.” This suggests that the organisation’s value system (cf. Feuer & Chaharbaghi, 1995) and culture (cf. Mills, 2017) are of paramount importance for contributing in a management system and approach that sustain and inform the strategy implementation process – underlining, thus, the role of COSM in an organisational set-up. From a leadership perspective, Esau (2016) illustrates such a role by exploring how organisational structuring and institutional capacity development are generators of institutional trust in public management and administration. The promotion of trust is amongst the objectives of leadership ethos (LE). In this view, LE is fundamental in sustaining COSM in organisational management.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the importance of LE as a backbone for COSM. The paper begins by presenting the concept of LE. It then briefly discusses vision and values, two amongst the attributes of LE. This is followed by discussion of the relationship between LE and COSM. The discussion arrives at four testable propositions. The paper offers four action steps for the practice of LE aiming at establishing COSM before concluding with a summary of its contributions, calling for scholars and practitioners to invest in exploring the understanding and practice of LE. This is an approach to leadership that promotes and sustains COSM in organisational management.

## **Understanding LE**

Contrary to the concept of Ethical Leadership (EL) that has been the focus in the debates and discussions by scholars and leadership practitioners over the past few decades (Ciulla, 1998, 2003, 2014; Cheng, et al., 2014; Ehrich, et al., 2015; Kalshoven, et al., 2016; Engelbrecht, et al., 2017) – which concept underpins ethical principles applied in the practice of leadership – Ethical Leadership focuses focusing on the leadership agent who must uphold certain principles that serve as fixed points. These ethical principles, in the

words of Caza, et al. (2004:170), “indicate what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, by reference to universal standards.” Such an understanding and practice, however, must go beyond the leadership agent and be instilled in the organisation as a whole. It must be developed and nurtured as a culture and value system within the organisation, making it an *ethos* of the organisation, of a group. Thus, LE.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines the Greek word (/ˈiːθɒs/) “ethos” as the disposition, character, or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, culture, or movement. This suggests that ethos could also indicate an attitude or predisposition towards others. In summary, the meanings of ethos focus on the characteristic ways in which a group enacts, embodies, and practices its convictions and moral judgements and sense of what is right and wrong – including virtues, social values, goals and obligations, or rules (Conradie & Abrahams, 2006).

LE incorporates the moral judgement by which leadership is embodied within “influence relationships” (Rost, 1991). For example, one may judge something or someone (an act, a person, an institution, a society or a form of leadership) to be virtuous, moral, immoral or indeed amoral – constituting a continuum through which moral duties and responsibilities are fulfilled. LE is associated with actions which add value, honour commitments to stakeholders and society, and obey laws (Caldwell, et al., 2015). In influencing others, leaders are most effective when they are perceived as ethical stewards – choosing service over self-interest (Block, 2013), maintaining a long-term perspective about wealth creation, and treating others as trusted owners and partners (Pfeffer, 1998). A morally virtuous leader is perceived as highly responsible, committed to the best interests of others, and effective at achieving results that come from highly motivated and engaged team members (Paine, 2002).

## **Two Attributes of LE**

“Outstanding” leadership is increasingly recognised as a “transformative” relationship with others (Bennis and Nanus, 2007) that adapts to change, pursues the best interests of stakeholders, and optimises long-term wealth creation (Pfeffer, 1998). In this respect, LE incorporates vision and values amongst its vital attributes.

### ***Vision***

Vision is regarded as a construct of leadership (Meindl, 1990; Shamir, et al., 1993; Klein & House, 1998; Hunt, et al., 1999; Jacobsen & House, 2001 in Partlow, et al., 2015) that received significant attention from leadership scholars over the past few decades (Strange & Mumford, 2002; Partlow, et al., 2015). Vision is associated with the image that one desires to achieve – typically focused on future outcomes (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Vision implies the ability “to know” as well as the capacity “to see.” When associated with leadership, vision is “an imagined or perceived but consistent pattern of communal possibilities to which others can be drawn, and whose values they will wish to share” (Morden, 1997: 668-676). Leadership vision identifies future possibilities to engage others in the pursuit of a worthy goal, while also enabling others to fulfil a higher personal potential (Barnard, 1938) suggesting that vision must be shared. A shared vision, according to Kouzes and Posner (2012) is characterised by:

- 1. *Imagining possible opportunities*** – envisioning what can be achieved to create both a road map to the future and to recognise conditions that can ultimately be attained (Strange & Mumford 2002);
- 2. *Finding a common purpose*** – recognising the motivations that bring people together and the needs which a common purpose fulfils (Rost, 1991);

3. *Appealing to common ideals* – including sensitivity to the values and ethical assumptions which motivate others (Ciulla, 1998); and
4. *Animating the vision* – making possibilities come to life and communicating the potential that is possible, enabling a leader to inspire others and to bring that potential to life (Kouzes and Posner, 2012).

Thus, vision is understood in terms of what one actually knows and can apply – in addition to what one sees or discerns.

### **Values**

Values are guiding principles of conduct reflecting personal but abstract perceptions of what is good, right, and desirable and are founded upon an interrelated set of ethical and moral assumptions (Graham, et al., 2013). Values encourage some behaviours while discouraging others (Schwartz, 1992) Value-consistent behaviour reflects an underlying ethical foundation (Maio, et al., 2009). Value Activation Theory (VAT) underscores the role of leaders in conveying the relevance of behaviours and stresses that contextual factors influence the impact of one's moral code (Torelli and Kaikati, 2009). VAT argues that leaders' actions influence follower reactions by promoting commitment. Follower responses reflect behaviour consistent with the moral standard set by the leader (Grojean, et al., 2004). In other words, when organisations and their leaders demonstrate ethically-based qualities such of caring, character, competence, and capacity to mention but a few (Mayer, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998; Cameron, 2011; Hayes, 2015), they become worthy of trust, commitment, dedication, and extra-role performance of their employees.

### **LE: The Backbone of COSM in Organisation Management**

A growing number of scholars believe that organisational culture and management strategy condition each other and must be compatible to secure a better performance of the organisation (Baird, et al., 2007; Chow and Liu, 2009; Gupta, 2011; Naranjo-Valencia, et al., 2011; Yarbrough, et al., 2011). This implies that the successful implementation of a specific strategy depends on a proper organisational culture – the fruit of leadership style or a model applied in the organisation. Equally correct is the argument suggesting that a proper organisational culture leads to a successful selection and implementation of a specific leadership strategy of the organisation (Wronka-Pośpiech & Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2016). This is because of the influence that the organisational culture exerts on the behaviour of both the follower and the leader which impacts on the implementation of leadership strategy (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Cameron, et al., 2006). To this end, Wronka-Pośpiech and Frączkiewicz-Wronka (2016) assert that just as organisational culture influences the process of leadership strategy formulation and implementation, the long-term realisation of leadership strategy may also influence organisational culture – it could either strengthen or weaken it. The extent of this impact will depend on whether the leadership strategy is consistent with the norms, values, and basic assumptions characteristic of the given culture. It is against the backdrop of the above that the first proposition is as follows:

**P<sub>1</sub>: Unless possible opportunities are imagined, it would be difficult for a leadership strategy to conduct activities consistent with the principles of action (standards, values) of the organisation. Such a strategy will exert a positive impact on the existing organisational culture, because it will further strengthen its values.**

In this respect, values and norms are placed at the centre of the discussion as is the case within the context of public administrative reforms (Hood, 1994; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Brewer & Kellough, 2016). For instance, this is a way of conceding that values are social principles, goals and standards that cultural members (both follower and leader) believe

have intrinsic worth (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Organisations need to promote and uphold the identified values and norms to secure a better performance in terms of organisational efficiency and effectiveness. This leads to the second proposition, which states the following:

**P<sub>2</sub>: LE, with its emphasis on vision and values promotes the identification of a common purpose amongst organisational cultural members. As such, this leadership strategy would influence or define an organisational culture of importance in determining the organisation's envisaged outcomes.**

Fehr, et al., (2015:193) argue that, "the impact of leaders' moralised actions on follower behaviour depends on the values that the leaders' actions reflect." In other words, Fehr, et al., suggest that COSM is a result of a belief system and incorporated values from a leadership relationship between leaders and followers. Values, in the context of this paper, are regarded as trans-situational notions of what is good, right, and desirable, implying that each moral foundation partly comprises an interrelated set of values (Graham, et al., 2013). Values guide attention and action by encouraging some behaviour while discouraging others (Schwartz, 1992; Verplanken & Holland, 2002). When they are consistent, values create a pattern of behaviour (Maio, et al., 2009), a determinant of organisational success. This suggests that beliefs, values, and norms are very sensitive but fundamental in determining the organisational outcome. Hence, by engaging and recognising the importance of values, COSM recognises and points to the role of leadership as that of orienting and guiding such beliefs, values, and norms in a way that would be productive to the organisation. Ultimately, "the impact of leaders' moralised actions on follower behaviour depends on the values that the leaders' actions reflect" (Fehr, et al., 2015:193). In this respect, the third proposition states the following:

**P<sub>3</sub>: LE is a particular type of leadership strategy exercised in the organisation with the view of determining the culture, the strategy of management, and ultimately the outcome of the organisation by appealing to common ideals.**

Additionally, in the context of LE, beliefs, values, and norms help enhance a culture that empowers leaders with the abilities to inspire others to transcend their own self-interests in the pursuit of a higher purpose and the organisational excellence (Kim, et al., 2004; Harrington, 2005; Caldwell, 2017). Such a culture will empower leaders with the ability to honour their duties to employees of keeping them informed, providing them with the resources to achieve individual goals, and seeking their highest potential (Harrington, 2005). Beliefs, values, and norms help foster a culture that empowers leaders with the ability to honour duties owed to individuals, the organisation, and to society (Caldwell, et al., 2014). The same culture allows the leaders to recognise and acknowledge that cooperative efforts through professional will and personal humility are key to organisational success (Jeung & Yoon, 2016; Caldwell, et al., 2017; Hearsom, 2017). Beliefs, values, and norms lead to a culture that empowers leaders with the ability to incorporate correct principles in their dealings with others and incorporate a virtue-based ethical foundation based upon such principles (Caldwell, 2017). Beliefs, values, and norms help promote a culture that empowers leaders with the ability to advocate for an increased understanding and greater insight that help people benefit themselves, the society, and the organisations in which they work (Holberton, 2004). This leads to the fourth proposition that asserts the following:

**P<sub>4</sub>: The practice of LE enables the organisational leadership to animate the vision by identifying and securing critical success factors associated with sound beliefs,**

values, and norms essential in the setting and establishment of COSM.

### **Action Steps for the Implementation and Practice of LE**

- 1. Establish mutual trust in leadership relationship within the organisation:** Trust in any organisational relationships is regarded as a defining factor of success or failure (Hosmer, 1995; Reina & Reina, 2015). Despite trust being acknowledged as essential in leadership relationships (Covey, 2004), leaders and organisations are rarely perceived as worthy of such trust (Barney and Hansen, 1994). Trust behaviour is fundamental; it is associated with cognitive beliefs, affective attitudes and emotions, conative intentions to act, and actual actions and behaviours, implying that trust behaviour is the result of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).
- 2. Demonstrate recognition of power dynamics in leadership relationship within the organisation:** Research findings suggest that organisational leaders who treat employees as valued and respected individuals rather than as interchangeable people, see those employees respond with greater commitment and higher performance, recognising their place and role in the leadership relationship (Buber & Smith, 2011). Caldwell and colleagues explained that beneficence, meaning the treatment of others with a commitment to their welfare, growth, and wholeness, is the action step of benevolent intention and demonstrates to followers that they are valued partners (Caldwell & Floyd, 2014).
- 3. Promote effectiveness in reaching the objectives in organisation management:** Leaders are increasingly challenged to “model the way” for employees and demonstrate that they understand the work to be performed in achieving the goals of their organisation and providing value for customers (Kouzes & Posner, 2011; 2012). This is a way of demonstrating competence in reaching the objective, which is an ethical and moral duty and obligation in leadership relationships. Ultimately, it is only by achieving intended results that leaders and organisations demonstrate their ability to contribute value to society, to generate a return on investment, and to survive as viable and ongoing entities.
- 4. Promote participation in leadership relationship within the organisation:** Creating a culture of engagement recognises the importance of aligned programmes, practices, policies, and systems that integrate employee efforts and involve employees as full partners (Pfeffer, 1998; Caldwell, et al., 2015). Covey (2006) notes that demonstrating participatory leadership is an ethical and moral duty and obligation in leadership relationships.

Each of these four steps plays a significant role in helping leaders identify with their ethical and moral duties and responsibilities in demonstrating LE. By establishing mutually trusting relationships, by recognising power dynamics in the leadership relationship, by showing effectiveness in reaching the organisational objectives, and by demonstrating participation in leadership relationships, LE enhances COSM which in return improves goal achievement.

### **Contribution of the Paper**

LE is a way of making the best world possible and treats others as ends, not means. It treats others with respect and creates added value. It pursues the welfare of the organisation and avoids breaking the letter or the intent of the law, as opposed to pursuing self-interest with guile and taking advantage of self-serving opportunities (Caldwell, et al., 2015).

In addressing the importance of establishing and promoting COSM in organisation management, this paper makes four meaningful contributions:

1. *It offers an understanding of LE as a backbone of COSM in organisation management.*
2. *It presents the ways in which LE creates conditions for the establishment and promotion of the COSM in the organisation management.*
3. *It offers four testable propositions for LE as a backbone for securing COSM in organisation management.*
4. *It identifies four action steps for the implementation and practice of LE with a view of enhancing COSM.*

## Conclusion

LE, as a means for articulating right and wrong, can create cultural values that align organisational systems to build trust, value employees, focus objectives, and engage participants. Based upon vision and values, LE assists decision-makers by establishing criteria for the strategic governance of organisations that enable them to function both efficiently and effectively.

As a strategic resource, LE provides a behavioural foundation based upon ethical and moral obligations to create organisational wealth, serve society, and honour relationships owed to stakeholders. This paper encourages scholars and practitioners to invest in exploring the understanding of LE as a backbone of COSM in organisation management.

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## About the Author

**Ken Kalala Ndalamba** is a PhD holder in Public Administration from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. His areas of research interests include Strategy, Organisation, and Leadership. Through his various publications, Ken aspires to contribute in establishing the moral fabric to help leaders and managers across the sectors conduct their respective businesses in a way that dignifies human beings to the benefit and interest of the businesses and the associated stakeholders. He is currently heading the Direction of Postgraduate studies at the Methodist University of Angola.