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Ubuntu Leadership – An explication of an Afrocentric leadership style

Abstract

The development of leadership theories has mostly followed a Western perspective, with non-Western theories often excluded from recorded chronologies of leadership examples. Ubuntu leadership, a style promoted following South Africa's first democratic election, is one such leadership theory. While Ubuntu has been an ethnographic philosophy and a long-established part of African cultures, its underlying philosophy gained prominence following eminent South African leaders' call to bring Ubuntu principles into the national reconstruction and development plan of post-apartheid South Africa. While Ubuntu leadership has since been extensively studied, it is still relatively unknown beyond Africa. This paper explains Ubuntu leadership by analysing the post-match speech of Siya Kolisi, the captain of the South African National Rugby team, following the team's victory at the World Cup Rugby Tournament in Japan in November 2019. Kolisi's speech has been heralded as remarkable worldwide, and upon closer investigation, reveals many elements of Ubuntu leadership. In this paper, the transcript of Siya Kolisi's speech is analysed to provide insights into the constituent elements of Ubuntu leadership to explicate this leadership style to unapprised audiences. Additionally, the analysis asks why this leadership style has not found acclaim beyond Africa and calls for further research to develop a taxonomy of Ubuntu leadership principles.

Introduction

Leadership theories have been in existence for millennia. While the “great man” theory is often cited as the first leadership theory, it is best described as a leadership philosophy as it originated from Christian religious beliefs and was not grounded in any particular postulation (Spocor, 2016). Notwithstanding its lack of theoretical grounding, the great man philosophy later gave rise to the first leadership theory, “trait” theory (Halaychik, 2016). On examining the history of leadership theory development, it is apparent that one leadership theory often served as the bedrock for the next. For instance, trait theory served as the foundation for behavioural theory (Horner, 1997), while the shortcomings of behavioural theory then gave rise to the development of contingency theory, and so forth (Ayman, Chemers, & Fiedler, 1995). The development of leadership theory, however, had a Western perspective, with some arguing that leadership theory often had an American, male-dominant focus (GuramatunhuCooper, 2017). It is however reassuring to note that efforts to address the flawed trajectory of leadership development are being made by scholars. In GuramatunhuCooper's (2017) work, the lack of an African perspective regarding political leadership was highlighted, while Cramer and Witcomb (2018) demonstrated how female leaders were excluded from the recording of a male dominant history (Cramer & Witcomb, 2018).

The literature also offers evidence of a resurgence of leadership theories that are not included in the dominant leadership literature. Scholars have, for instance, identified emotional leadership – following successful female leaders who have proudly acknowledged their proclivity for emotional leadership (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). These lesser-known leadership theories are yet to receive the same level of scrutiny. While the dominant, mostly Western leadership theories are further popularised through media outlets, consultants, and practitioners, the same cannot be said of these lesser-known leadership theories. The result is that the unapprised are often at a loss to understand these lesser-known theories as they are often the preserve of specialist academics. Heightened interest in a lesser-known leadership style, therefore, is unsurprising when the media or social media highlights such leadership styles by scrutinising the acts or omissions of leaders or other luminaries. For example, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, has helped to elucidate the concept of empathetic leadership in politics, where expression of empathy is often considered an undesirable trait. Ardern was quoted in a social media blog: “It takes courage and strength to be empathetic and I am proudly an empathetic, compassionate leader and politician” (Pozzo, 2018). Soon after making this comment, Ardern gave an exemplary demonstration of her empathetic leadership style through the management of the aftermath of a terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The exposure of Ardern’s leadership style through the media and social media platforms then gave rise to a renewed academic interest in empathetic leadership, thereby making this leadership style part of the leadership development discourse (Mustaqim, 2019; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). So, too, have various media sources helped to underline leadership styles based on non-Western philosophies. For example, in November 2008, during a terrorist attack on a major hotel in Mumbai, India, the media noticed how none of the hotel’s employees – although they would have known of escape routes in the hotel – fled the scene. All employees stayed for the duration of the terrorist siege, and various stories of courage and selfless service – where employees offered assistance to the hotel’s guests at great risk to themselves – were recorded (Deshpande & Raina, 2011). The media exposé of the courageous acts of the hotel staff led to further research to help explain why they would have exposed themselves to the perilous conditions of a terrorist siege if they had ample opportunity to extricate themselves from the scene. Following this incident, scholars provided an explanation for the hotel staff’s behaviour and concluded that their behaviour was the result of what they called Indo-European Leadership (IEL) (Cappelli, Singh, Singh, & Useem, 2015).

Ubuntu, an African leadership philosophy, has found acclaim in post-apartheid South Africa, yet it is not known – at least not to the same extent as Western leadership theories – outside of Africa. Similar to the examples mentioned earlier, recently South Africa too provided an exemplar of *Ubuntu* leadership on a most unlikely international platform: the winning of the Webb Ellis Cup at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Yokohama, Japan.

Article Objectives

The focus of media reports following South Africa’s victory over England soon shifted from the game to the post-match speech of its captain, Siya Kolisi. Kolisi’s post-match speech proved immensely popular and created a euphoric sense of unity among South African supporters. The elation created by his words was intriguing, and the speech was widely regarded as precedent-setting (Kennedy, 2019). In this paper, the interwoven messages of Kolisi’s speech are reviewed by means of a basic content analysis in order to reveal some of the constituent elements of *Ubuntu* leadership for an apprised audience. It is hoped that by exploring *ubuntu* leadership principles through the analysis of a simple post-match rugby speech, this paper will stimulate further interest in *Ubuntu* leadership.

Kolisi as Leader

Siya Kolisi is heralded as the first black person to lead South Africa's national rugby team to a Rugby World Cup victory. While this distinction may seem superfluous in a multi-cultural society, it is truly noteworthy in the South African context, as Kolisi rose to the highest position in a sport that, until the democratisation of South Africa, was a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism (Steenveld & Strelitz, 1998). Kolisi was born in one of the most impoverished provinces of South Africa (Chitiga-Mabugu, Ngepah, Nhemachena, Motala, Mathebula, & Mupela, 2014) and is credited for using sport as a platform for development. His leadership and philanthropy have been recognised, culminating in his receipt of the International Peace and Sport award for outstanding contribution to peace, dialogue, and social change through rugby (Peace and Sport, 2019).

Method

The unedited post-match speech of Siya Kolisi following South Africa's victory over England was transcribed. While there are numerous versions of this speech available on the internet, the transcription of the recording posted by Pundit Arena, an Irish sports media house, was selected. As the speech is relatively short, the researcher was able to conduct manual coding by reading and re-reading the post-match speech to identify salient themes (Bryman, 2008).

The Importance of Kolisi's Address

While the exchange of platitudes and acknowledgments by captains after such a game is typically the same (captains thank their teams, acknowledge their opponents' efforts, and so forth), Kolisi managed to elucidate some noteworthy points in his speech. He managed to acknowledge some of his country's political and socio-economic quandaries and attempted to overcome the divide between the country's diverse rugby support base. He used his platform to inspire the entire South African nation, and demonstrated cultural competency by acknowledging the host country, Japan, with a short Japanese phrase and the customary bowing of the head at the end of his speech. It could therefore be argued that his speech transcended the normal rhetoric offered by captains after such tournaments.

Although *Ubuntu* has been an ethnographic philosophy and a long-established part of African cultures, it has only recently been introduced to the broader South African society following the call by acclaimed South African leaders to bring *Ubuntu* principles into the national reconstruction and development plan of post-apartheid South Africa (Nkondo, 2007; Hailey, 2008). The philosophy of *Ubuntu* has since been studied in many sectors, including education (Makalela, 2019), business management (Karsten & Illa, 2005), politics (Nkondo, 2007), leadership (Setlhodi, 2019), and medicine (Stapleton, 2019). While it is difficult to succinctly define *Ubuntu*, as the concept lacks a single acknowledged definition (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho, 2013), the philosophy of *Ubuntu* represents an ethos that draws on crucial community values and ideals (Hailey, 2008). An analysis of Kolisi's speech reveal many of these community values and ideals.

Grounded in Ubuntu Philosophy

Kolisi's entire speech is grounded in the core principles of *Ubuntu*. Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho (2013) identified the core principles of *Ubuntu* as communalism, interdependence, compassion, empathy, respect, dignity, equity, fairness, reciprocity, inclusivity, and a sense of shared destiny among peoples, as well as hospitality,

responsiveness, and harmony (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho, 2013). Kolisi's post-match presentation encompasses many of these core values. He started his speech by thanking the South African supporters, both those in South Africa and those who had travelled to watch the game in Japan. He acknowledged his coach and then went on to describe the unique context of the game's supporters. For instance, he thanked the people who gathered at their local taverns and *shebeens* (explained later in this paper) to watch the game. He thanked the people in the rural areas, and even the homeless who made the effort to watch the game at communal screening areas. He then thanked the Japanese people for hosting the games and ended his speech with a Japanese sentence and the customary bowing of the head.

Kolisi acknowledged that his team's victory had a more profound significance. He contextualised the game and victory for the uninformed so they could understand that the country (South Africa) had many problems, but that he hoped that the way in which the team worked together and embraced diversity could be an example to the rest of South Africa.

In contrast to a Western perspective dominated by individualism, collectivism is viewed more favourably in African societies (Eaton & Louw, 2000). Given Kolisi's ethnic background, collectivism as embodied in *Ubuntu* would be central to his response and that is why, in the author's opinion, he responded by displaying gratitude and thanking all supporters in South Africa. For many readers in countries with diverse populations, this may seem obvious, but South Africa continues to struggle with racial conflict and a disparate distribution of wealth (Gibson, 2015). While South Africa experienced a propitious transition to democracy, the country currently faces many challenges, including steady economic growth, stable and predictable political institutions, and a supportive political culture (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). While the victory of the South African rugby team over England certainly cannot contribute directly to solving the quandaries of South Africa, the contribution of sport to nation building cannot be discarded and Kolisi used this international stage to demonstrate to the people, and perhaps more specifically to the leaders of South Africa, that working together to achieve a common goal could be achieved (Labuschagne, 2008).

Inclusivity

Kolisi's speech is characterised by inclusive language. He thanked all the South Africans who supported the national rugby team during the tournament, noting that many had gathered at taverns and shebeens to watch the match: "[We] really appreciate all the support; people in the taverns, people in the shebeens ..." The distinction between a tavern and shebeen might not be obvious. While most readers would know a tavern as an inn or public house where alcohol is served under regulated conditions, a shebeen in the South African context is an unregulated drinking establishment, normally a house located in the poorer communities (Charman, Petersen, & Govender, 2014). By referencing both the supporters that frequent taverns as well as those who frequent shebeens, Kolisi bridged the divide between the affluent and marginalised supporters of the game.

A further example of the inclusive language used by Kolisi is demonstrated when he thanked homeless people, people living in rural areas, and people living on farms. In this regard he said:

... people on farms and homeless people, there were screens there and people in rural areas, thank you so much. We appreciate all the support. We love you South Africa, and we can achieve anything if we work together as one.

Fan parks (“there were screens there”) are now intrinsic to mega-sport events. These parks are public areas where mega-sport events are televised in such a way that they mimic the atmosphere in the sports arena (McGillivray & Frew, 2015). Of importance is Kolisi’s acknowledgment that fan parks would provide even homeless people with the opportunity to watch the game. This reference to homeless people is important and demonstrates Kolisi’s understanding of the socio-economic quandaries of South Africa. Despite the country’s efforts to provide public housing to a section of the nation previously excluded from development under Apartheid, homelessness is still a major problem in South Africa (Killander, 2019). Kolisi’s acknowledgement that even homeless people are part of the support base of the nation’s national rugby team shows that he acknowledges the marginalised members of society’s support of the game.

Kolisi further thanked people living in rural areas and those living on farms. Again, this distinction should be elucidated for the benefit of non-South African audiences. While people living in rural areas can be construed as those who live outside metropolitan areas, people living on farms, in the South African context, have a distinctly different meaning. The South African agriculture industry is labour-intensive, with most of the farm workers living in free or subsidised housing on the farmer’s land. The industry is characterised by low wages, with farm workers and their families having limited access to education and opportunities for advancement. This sector, thus, lacks the skills to engage in the wider economy and is often faced with perpetual poverty (Visser & Ferrer, 2015). By explicitly mentioning farm workers in his speech, Kolisi’s speech would resonate with an even wider audience and demonstrates his acknowledgement of the broad support base of the team.

Promoting Harmonious Relations

It is well-known that South Africa’s liberation occurred with very little conflict, and at the time the country was lauded by the rest of the world for its peaceful transition to democracy. Since then, however, the country has experienced many problems. For example, corruption and the blinding loyalty of leaders to the leading political party have been some of the major concerns identified recently (Hasan, 2019). In his speech, Kolisi appears to be very aware of South Africa’s socio-political problems. In this regard, he noted the following:

We have so many problems in our country but to have a team like this, you know, we come from different backgrounds, different races and we came together with one goal and we wanted to achieve it. I really hope we have done that for South Africa, to show that we can pull together if we want to achieve something (Kennedy, 2019).

Respect and Cultural Competency

Central to the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is respect (Hailey, 2008). Kolisi demonstrated respect at three levels: respect for individuals, for organisational structures, and for different cultures. In one of the earliest works on *Ubuntu* and leadership, Mangaliso (2001) noted a number of principles to consider in implementing *Ubuntu* leadership. Three of the principles noted by Mangaliso are relevant to Kolisi’s speech (Mangaliso, 2001). First, treat others with dignity and respect; second, understand the cultural perspectives of different groups; and third, honour seniority. In Kolisi’s speech, he held the team’s entire support base, the South African society, in high regard. It was already noted how he thanked the different sub-groups of his support base. Kolisi also demonstrated respect for seniority by mentioning the team’s coach on two occasions. When asked by the reporter how important it was to “lay a physical marker” early in the game, Kolisi gave the following response:

That's why we have a 6-2 split to make sure we go out physically and then you ... ah ... that is what we wanted to do; you know our coach doesn't hide it and "ja," from the minute go we wanted to have a quick start because we know that is what they were chasing so that's why some guy's shoulders were off, early contact, so "ja," they were amazing to that they challenge us to the best.

While the question of "laying a physical marker" referred to Kolisi's strategy on the field, he did not focus on his own volition, but quickly recognised the team coach as part of this strategy. On another occasion, when asked what the victory would mean in "a country where rugby is a religion," Kolisi responded: "[The] coach just came and told us the last game, we are not playing for us anymore we are playing for our people back home. And that is what we wanted to do today."

The two references to the coach are very significant when viewing Kolisi's speech through the lens of *Ubuntu* leadership. Such reference demonstrates his acknowledgment of the seniority of the coach within the organisational structure of the team. Respect for seniority, especially within leadership, is noted as an important requirement for successful implementation of *Ubuntu* leadership (Mangaliso, 2001).

A further example of the respect that Kolisi demonstrated during his speech is the cultural respect towards the host of the games. In this regard he stated:

Thank you so much, and lastly, thank you so much to the people of Japan, the people that came from England as well; thank you so much for supporting the sport of rugby, thank you for bringing rugby here, we appreciate you all, "arigatou gozaimasu," thank you.

By including the Japanese salutation, *arigatou gozaimasu*, and completing his speech with an *ojigi*, which is a gesture to bend the body to the guest (Yusri, Idrus, and Lestari, 2020), Kolisi demonstrated cultural competency, an important element of *Ubuntu* leadership.

Lack of *Ubuntu* Leadership in Organisational Leadership Discourse

While the primary focus of this paper is to explain *Ubuntu* leadership by analysing a simple post-match rugby speech, the question can indeed be asked why this leadership theory has not found acclaim outside Africa, or indeed been part of the organisational leadership development discourse. One reason may be that much of the leadership development in Africa has concerned political leadership and there has been a paucity of empirical research on *Ubuntu* leadership within the context of organisational leadership (Fourie, Van der Merwe, & Van der Merwe, 2017). While most of the scholarly work on *Ubuntu* leadership has been conducted within the African context, a further challenge for *Ubuntu* leadership theory development is, in this author's view, the perception that this leadership style can only be practiced in an Afrocentric context. Indeed, most of the literature on *Ubuntu* leadership stems from an Afrocentric perspective. This author would like to challenge this view. Certainly, many of the constituent elements of *Ubuntu* leadership would be applicable to other cultures and settings as well?

It is encouraging to see that work on developing a taxonomy for *Ubuntu* leadership has indeed begun. Grobler and Singh developed a taxonomy for, what they called "Afrocentric leadership." The population for this study was drawn from South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique and found that the African taxonomy of leadership behaviour, while similar to Western leadership taxonomies, contained additional categories that have a participatory, democratic, and communalistic focus (Grobler and Singh, 2018). It is, however, frustrating to see that no other studies have been conducted that either confirm or deny this finding. Similarly, no other study has been conducted in

other populations. There is also limited knowledge on comparisons between *Ubuntu* leadership and other developed leadership styles (Pérezts, Russon, and Painter, 2020). Notwithstanding the lack of other studies, our current knowledge, based on Grobler's findings, indicate that the taxonomy of *Ubuntu* leadership demonstrates a shift from purely focusing on the actions of the leader of an organisation. It would, therefore, be interesting to see how *Ubuntu* leadership compares to some of the most prominent post-heroic era leadership styles like ethical leadership, authentic leadership, distributive leadership, and servant leadership (Clark and Harrison, 2017).

This paper argued that non-Western leadership theories are often excluded from chronologies of leadership theory development and that highlighting these leadership theories through other means, like media and social media, are often the first step in awakening interest in other audiences. Many authors have written about *Ubuntu* leadership, but perhaps now is the time to refocus on its further development and refinement in order to bring this leadership theory into the fold of general leadership discourse.

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