

## **Leadership in Africa: Meanings, Impacts and Identities<sup>i</sup>**

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“Africans have this thing called UBUNTU. It is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being able to go the extra mile for the sake of others. We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours.”

Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town

### **Introduction**

In this paper we will draw on our experiences of researching a pan-African leadership development initiative to explore the manner in which participants use their understanding of leadership to facilitate beneficial social change in their communities. The voices that speak to this are African - 300 men and women from 19 sub-Saharan countries; participants on a Pan-African leadership development programme sponsored by the British Council (through money from a Spending Review bid from the British Treasury) and delivered in partnership with Questions of Difference (QoD) and LEAD International<sup>ii</sup>.

The *InterAction* programme seeks to transform Africa through the development of a new generation of leaders who are encouraged not only to take up their own leadership roles but to share their insights and learning to develop and inspire others within their communities. The emphasis on appreciative inquiry (see Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987 for a theoretical overview and White and Nemeroff, 2005 for an example of its application in South Africa), “Africa for Africa through collaboration” and leadership within a community context makes this distinctive from more traditional post-colonial development initiatives. Indeed, rather than bringing in “experts” from the “developed world” *InterAction* embraces African wisdom, acknowledging the strengths and contributions of all participants and partners, and uses a facilitative, discursive and experiential approach rather than a more didactic teaching based format. See Table 1 for a list of the guiding principles, passions and assumptions on which the programme is founded.

## 678 PHILOSOPHY OF THE INTERACTION LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME<sup>iii</sup>

6 Passions	7 Principles	8 Assumptions
(1) Africa (2) Age (3) Gender (4) Community (5) Leadership (6) Me	(1) Africa for Africa through collaboration (2) Appreciation, good will & good intent (3) The power of questions (4) Exploiting the magic of difference (5) Inviting & working with chaos & order to allow great things to emerge (6) Enabling people to do great work (7) Working towards congruence	(1) In every organisation something works (2) What we focus on becomes our reality (3) Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities (4) The language we use creates our reality (5) The act of asking questions to an organisation influences that organisation (6) It is important to value differences (7) People have more confidence to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past (8) If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be the best about the past

**Table 1**

As an independent research partner, our intention was to gain insights into the mechanisms and processes by which this initiative builds upon and challenges traditional conceptions of leadership in Africa and facilitates engagement with transformational<sup>iv</sup> social change. A guiding principle of the research is, therefore, to give voice to new ways of thinking by Africans about leadership in Africa. These ways of thinking about leadership are drawn from the experiences and practices of people engaged in acts of social influence aimed at bringing about beneficial social change in their communities. Examples of this in the political, business and civic areas of life include housing improvement in rural communities, start-up businesses, HIV/AIDS programmes, and street children educational projects.

The research provided a space for participants to surface the theory that informed their practice, with the intention that this may inform their future practice, and that of others. In a nutshell, our aim was for theory (or less grandly, thinking, insights) to emerge *from* practice, *for* practice. This paper addresses both the manner in which African participants conceive of and enact leadership and the kinds of impact that can result in a range of community contexts. Observations are also included about the research process as one of provocative social construction through the use of narrative and action research.

### **The limits of Western management and leadership theory**

A number of authors (e.g. Blunt and Jones, 1997; Wheatley, 2001; Jackson, 2004) have highlighted the manner in which Western management and leadership theory may represent a new form of colonialism - enforcing and reinforcing ways of thinking and acting that are rooted in North American and European ideologies. By doing this, there is a tendency to play down the importance of indigenous knowledge, values and behaviours, assuming instead a linear progression from the “developing” to the “developed” and/or the “traditional” to the “modern”. Such an approach to leadership and management theory, however, is not only pejorative (classifying non-western approaches as “under-developed”) but also obstructive to the emergence of more constructive theory, practice and policy.

Jackson (2002; 2004) highlights exactly such a situation with regards to cross-cultural management and leadership research in Africa – first noting a serious lack of good theorising and research and then concluding that what little there is firmly “entrenched within the developed-developing world paradigm which mitigates against more constructive theorising and conceptual development” (Jackson, 2002, p.3). He has made some steps towards addressing this shortcoming through a major study of 15 sub-Saharan countries (Jackson, 2004) that gives much for consideration, including the manner in which African managers tend to be highly skilled in managing cultural diversity and multiple stakeholders and enacting “humanistic” management practices.

The recent race riots in Paris, terrorist bombs in London and ongoing turmoil in Iraq point to an increasing resistance of populations who feel disenfranchised and devalued by the wholesale imposition

of Western values and ideals that largely neglect the multiculturalism in which we now live. But this is only the tip of the iceberg, for every voice repressed is one that potentially carries the answer to challenges that we face. In the same way that scientists are now travelling to remote parts of the world seeking traditional knowledge about the medicinal qualities of plants largely unknown in the West, so to do we stand to gain from the fresh insights that can be given from understanding a different perspective. After all, it was the Japanese who took W. Edwards Deming's ideas about production management and produced an economy that was the envy of the West and scholars are now increasingly looking towards the East for new perspectives on management and leadership (e.g. Prince, 2005). Given the emphasis on collective action and social engagement in African culture, it is also highly likely that important lessons could be learnt here that could offer powerful insights into concepts such as collective and distributed leadership that, whilst increasingly promoted in sectors such as education, health and policing in the UK and US, still appear to be somewhat elusive in practice (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2005; Hopkins and Jackson, 2003).

### ***Beyond Hofstede's theory of cross-cultural management***

Much of the field of cross-cultural management remains dominated by Gert Hofstede's seminal study *Culture's Consequences* (1980) in which he identified four dimensions that differentiate value orientations between cultures: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism* and *masculinity/femininity*. Subsequent studies have tended to support the validity of these dimensions whilst also revealing a number of additional dimensions, such as *long- versus short-term orientation* (Hofstede, 2001) and *fatalism* (or *locus of control*) (Ayca et al., 2000; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2000; Ralston et al., 1993; Yan and Hunt, 2005). However, whilst this model has helped maintain some consistency in a complex multidisciplinary field, it reinforces a particular way of thinking about culture that seems particularly ill-suited to understanding multicultural societies such as those found across Africa (Jackson, 2004) and increasingly elsewhere.

Tayeb (2001) gives an excellent critique of some of the main problems with much current cross-cultural management research. The first problem is "the dimensionalization of national culture", whereby researchers apply a primarily positivist methodology to break culture down into its constituent characteristics. Such an approach is appealing because of the capacity for cross-cultural comparisons and simplification of the phenomenon under investigation however, "by putting culture into neat, sometimes unconnected, little boxes we are in danger of losing sight of the big picture" (ibid, p93). Tayeb rightly points out that placing countries on a relatively static continuum neglects the fluctuating, changing and sometimes paradoxical nature of culture. Thus, for example, individualistic nations such as the UK and France demonstrate collectivism under certain circumstances, whilst collectivist cultures, such as Japan, demonstrate individualism under others. If, indeed, dimensions such as those identified by Hofstede *et al* do exist then perhaps they should be considered less like a unitary scale and more like the Chinese principle of dualism typified by Yin and Yang (Lowe, 2001; Fang, 1998). Thus, as the Chinese believe that Yin and Yang exist in everything, so to, must the seed of collectivism reside within individualism and so on. Such an approach encourages a shift from simplistic objectivist representations of culture to a more complex social constructivist appreciation of the myriad possibilities and perceived realities.

Tayeb's (2001) critique also highlights other pitfalls of much current cross-cultural theory, including the conflation of non-cultural factors (such as education, age, occupation and life experience) with cultural factors (such as those identified by Hofstede); lack of parity of meaning of concepts and constructs (such as "Human Resource Management" and "leadership") across cultures; along with a number of methodological issues and research biases. Another key problem is the manner in which such theory assumes that "national culture" is homogenous and common across individuals (Lowe, 2001; Maznevski *et al.*, 2002).

All of these factors point to a need for more empirical research, but research that is prepared to step outside the dominant Western paradigms and "give voice" (Renard and Eastwood, 2003) to other perspectives. By making space to listen to and reflect on non-Western responses to the challenges of management and leadership, not only do we stand to facilitate the evolution of more appropriate

organisational and leadership forms for the country in question but we also stand to gain new insights for practice elsewhere.

### **Research Methodology**

The current research takes a narrative and action research approach to exploring the impact of the *InterAction* leadership programme both in terms of the manner in which it facilitates the emergence of new concepts of leadership in Africa and how it impacts upon the communities in which the participants engage. The research is distinct from the more formal programme evaluation conducted by the British Council and QoD, by the way in which it considers leadership within the broader social context within which individuals live and work, rather than being exclusively concerned with the process and content of the programme. The *InterAction* programme was thus conceived of as providing a framework (and for all of the participants we spoke with, it was an inspirational framework) within which they developed and explored their understandings and practice of leadership in their different communities, but to which they each brought a whole host of external factors (such as past experience, personal circumstances, age, gender, etc.) that helped shape their process of engagement.

Our research approach was to engage with participants (and other stakeholders) in the programme as co-inquirers into the meanings they were attaching to the notion of leadership and how they enacted these meanings, as leaders, to bring about wider social impact within their communities. These can be shown as the following elements:

- Meanings – the meanings participants were giving to the concept of leadership;
  - the processes by which these meanings were being constructed and reconstructed in their life experiences.
- Impacts – on participants as they applied these meanings to themselves, in their self-concept and identity as a leader;
  - on participants’ communities.

### ***Research principles and assumptions***

Our research approach was founded upon a set of guiding principles that were consistent with the overall ethos of the *InterAction* programme but still enabled an independent and critical engagement with the data. Our primary methodological assumptions included that as participative action researchers we acted as co-inquirers, co-creators and co-interpreters of narratives and texts; that meanings and actions are socially constructed; that meanings and action inter-relate to inform each other (i.e. theory *from* practice and theory *for* practice); and that leadership is a socially and culturally embedded process.

### ***Research design***

The research was designed to draw on (and triangulate where possible) a range of data collection methods that would enable an inductive understanding of the manner in which the *InterAction* programme facilitates new ways of thinking about and enacting leadership. These can be broadly grouped into seven categories.

1. **Context immersion:** participant observation during a range of modules and activities in the *InterAction* programme, including: Pan African Event, Kenya; Module 1, Uganda; Module 3, Ghana; and UK programme design workshop.
2. **Preliminary conversations:** narrative inquiry group interviews with participants on Module 1 in Uganda and Module 3 in Ghana, exploring concepts of leadership, identity and impact amongst participants.
3. **Online survey:** a qualitative survey inviting views on leadership and impact from the whole cohort of 300 participants in the first round of the *InterAction* programme (70 responses received).
4. **Follow-up conversations:** a series of one-to-one biographical interviews conducted with participants from the *InterAction* programme in Tanzania (15 interviews) and Zambia (12 interviews) 1-2 months after the end of the first round of the programme.

5. **Community visits:** follow-up visits to the communities visited by participants during the *InterAction* programme (3 in Tanzania and 3 in Zambia, supplemented by feedback conversations with 4 communities in Ghana).
6. **Stakeholder conversations:** ongoing discussions and conversations with various key stakeholders including the British Council (Programme Manager; country directors and representatives in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia and UK), QoD, LEAD International, UK participants and facilitation team, Pan African and In-country facilitators, and participants from another British Council leadership initiative in sub-Saharan Africa.
7. **Secondary data:** programme materials, evaluation data and participant stories developed and collected by the British Council, QoD and LEAD International.

### ***Data analysis and interpretation***

The rich and diverse body of data called for a variety of analysis methods. The primary mechanism, however, in the spirit of action research, was an inductive, qualitative approach whereby the researchers immersed themselves in the observations and narrative accounts, letting patterns, concepts and ideas emerge over time. In order to maintain validity, the two researchers initially interpreted the data independently, drawing their own interpretations prior to a mutual process of verification and moderation, both with one another, the British Council Programme Director and colleagues. As such, the final interpretations are the result of a cyclical process of reflection and dialogue, and the research process can be considered as one of provocative social engagement, whereby the researchers, in collaboration with other actors, constructed, challenged and reconstructed varying representations and interpretations of the data over time. The intention was thus not to generate an objective representation of the “truth” or “reality” of leadership in the contexts explored, but rather to create some compelling, engaging and occasionally competing accounts that could be shared so as to encourage further reflection and discussion (see section on *Meanings of African Leadership* for further explanation).

### **African leadership: meanings and connotations**

In our research we were particularly interested in the impact of the *InterAction* programme on participants and their communities. A first step to creating this impact, however, was the manner in which the programme challenged participants to reflect on and question their conceptions of leadership and what it means to be a leader. Indeed, this is a fundamental step towards understanding and recognising the kinds of practical impact they are achieving within their communities. Thus, in this section of the paper we will consider the inherent (and frequently paradoxical) meanings and connotations attributed to “African leadership” before moving on to examples of impact in the next section.

### ***Connotations of “African leadership”***

The president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki said in his recent address to the Association of African Universities conference, “Education has an important role to play in the economic, cultural and political renaissance of our continent and in the drive for the development of indigenous knowledge systems. This implies that all educational curricula should have Africa as their focus, and as a result be indigenous in its grounding and orientation. To address this state of affairs we need a distinctly African knowledge system” (Mbeki, 2005). In the context of leadership education there are calls for a leadership that is suited to the epoch, a leadership that is distinctively African. At a time according to Festus Obiakor when Africa begins to witness a new post colonial, post dictatorial/militarist era, “theories of effective African-centred leadership must be taught in African schools from pre-kindergarten to university levels. Africans need African-centred leaders and not European-centred leaders. African-centred education is the key to building patriotic African leadership” (Obiakor, 2005: 417). Dele Olojede (2005) speaks of the “challenge of leadership as a catalyst for transformation” in Africa.

The Pan-African *InterAction* leadership programme is designed to respond to such calls. It brings together leaders from across the Continent to interact, connect, support and learn from one another, and in doing so to develop and extend their confidence and capacity to exercise leadership that

transforms Africa in a manner congruent with African values and ideals. If we are able to gain insights from their experience of just what African leadership is (and could be), it becomes possible to share this knowledge with other leaders in Africa and elsewhere and to learn from that experience.

Given the vastness of the continent and the immense national, tribal, ethnic and religious diversity, however, is the term “African Leadership” too broad in its ontological assumptions about “leadership” leave alone any sense of “African” leadership? If the attempt is to see what the term denotes, this is probably true. When however we see what the term connotes for people engaged in leading social action, the term evoked three different kinds of responses in participants. For some the term “African Leadership” was neutral in its connotations. For the majority however it evoked an emotive response, some seeing the term in a negative light and others in a much more positive way.

About a fifth of the 70 respondents to the online survey were ‘neutral’ about the concept of “African Leadership” - seeing leadership as the same everywhere. Comments such as “leadership is non nationalistic” and “leadership is leadership – anywhere” were typical. Some, though, while embracing this universal concept of leadership also spoke of the distinctiveness of the African context and the need for leaders to be alert to “the peculiarities of their communities”. As one succinctly put it, “leadership is generic; it only has to be applied in context”.

For about a third, the term “African Leadership” evoked primarily negative connotations. For these, the concept was associated with national political leadership and with despotic power hungry leaders who had used their positions for personal gain, and were frequently unwilling to let go of power. They were sensitive to the negative image it conjured in their minds, and many felt that it represented one side only. There were examples of excellent political (and non-political) leaders and that the opportunity for a new approach was there to be seized by a new generation of leaders who were more in tune with the needs and aspirations of a people who were themselves politically demanding as citizens. For these the acknowledgement of past problems represented a realism which would fuel a more positive future. In one case the question itself was considered inappropriate and “African leadership” was considered to be a pejorative term with racially or continentally discriminatory roots.

For the remaining respondents (nearly half) the term “African leadership” was seen in an increasingly positive way that generated a sense of pride about what Africa is; what Africans have done and can do as leaders. “African leadership” was for them about being engaged together as Africans in a stirring enterprise whose time had come. It was, for these people, a term evoking pride and optimism, and was often contrasted with previous negative images of corrupt and self-centred leadership.

“Africa is part of the world, and the new wind of leadership that is democratic encourages participation and guarantees the rights and freedoms of its citizenry is become the order of the day. The days where African leadership was a replete of abuse of power are fast giving way to a more participatory process where every citizen has a stake in how the state is governed.”  
(Male, Development Worker, Ghana)

One thing that clearly emerges is that there is a passion many associate with the term “African Leadership”. It causes people to be rightly wary of the importation of other models of leadership which may be neo-colonialist by intent or effect. Or indeed wary of the suggestion that outside models are superior in any way; that other models like Western models are seen to be the norm, while ‘African leadership’ through its naming is ‘othered’. The term also carries with it for a majority of participants a positive ring, an endorsement of Africans who provide leadership in an Africa of which they take pride. A more geographically located statement like “Leadership in Africa” is certainly more neutral than “African leadership” which suggests leadership that resides in, and is owned by Africans. It will provoke less emotion, and that may be its strength, but for the same reason it may also be its weakness.

### ***Meanings of “African leadership”***

We have engaged in conversations with participants of the *InterAction* programme as a key approach to unpacking the meanings associated with leadership. We talked with them in face-to-face conversations about their ideas of leadership, what leadership meant to them, and how it shaped their image of themselves as leaders and how it impacted on their practice of leadership. We called these meetings with participants “conversations” rather than “interviews” to emphasise the approach was co-inquiry. The perception that the interviewer with a good approach and clever questions (bait on a hook) can bring out the answers that lie already formed in the interviewee (to catch the fish) is unsatisfactory in this context for two principal reasons. It renders the interviewee passive and it assumes that “answers” exist. Through the conversation the initiating researchers (Richard and Philip) hold a space within which the story of the participant’s (primary narrator’s) experience is formulated and told. The process of constructing the story, telling it and finding the meanings therein is a creative process of storytelling and narrative inquiry in which both participant and the initiating researcher are actively involved. Such a process is in part the enablement of tacit knowledge held by the primary narrator. And it is more too. It is the process of generating knowledge, of converting personal experience into meaning through the process of setting words to the experience. The reflective space allows opportunity for the primary narrator to “ponder the meaning of what has transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environments” (Raelin, 2002, in Miller, 2005: 367) or, in the language of *InterAction*, it offers the actors the opportunity to “notice and name”.

This approach is not without its problems. The involvement of the initiating researcher will of course affect the story that is created and the meanings drawn from the story. For example as Goodley and his co-authors say in their book *Researching Life Stories*, analysis does have the potential, in part at any rate, to “take ownership away from the primary narrator and masks the qualities of a narrative with the abstract interpretations of the theorist” (2004:149). In social inquiry, there is of course no method that does not bring the researcher into the data and no interpretation of that data that is not created as a result of the researcher finding her or his way out of the data. A balance of agency needs to be struck between the initiating researcher and the primary narrator as the one leads in facilitating the inquiry, and the other leads in the telling and sense making of her or his story. Social inquiry is after all relational and good social inquiry is about the co-inquirers taking care to work out a good enough way of relating for the purposes of the inquiry.

### Holding the tensions

One of the most important findings from this part of the enquiry is that multiple meanings and interpretations are frequently held by the same individual(s) and can co-exist with varying degrees of comfort and discomfort. These conflicting meanings can arise from a variety of sources, including the impact of historical, cultural, social, political and psychological factors. Colonial history and the experiences of de-colonisation (all through political struggle, some through armed struggle), for example, have shaped leadership thinking at a national level. Traditional cultures, including religion, have been important local influencing factors in gender and age role constructions. Urbanisation, and with it education, the media and the web, inevitably clashed with local traditional cultural influences, often weakening them. An example is the tension between the power of community (the ‘ubuntu’ factor) and the power of position (the status/charismatic factor). For individuals, leadership development, in the absence of any single leadership narrative, has been about finding, or rather forging, among the competing influences, a leadership path that works for them.

Jackson (2004) proposes that recognising and engaging meaningfully with these “integrating” and “disintegrating” dynamics is essential to understanding management and leadership in Africa:

“Africa’s history, even before the slave trade, is one of cross-cultural interaction and often antagonistic dynamics (...), normally within systems of power relations (...). Modern organisations in Africa still contain these diverse cultural elements: ideas and practices as well as people. Not only is an understanding of these dynamics necessary, but also a reconciling, integrating and synergising of disparities contained within dynamics are (*sic*) essential to management and organisation development efforts in Africa.” (Jackson, 2004, p.3)

The shedding of past images of leadership

Through life experience as well as the experience of the *InterAction* leadership programme participants have come to an emerging clarity about the nature of leadership. Interestingly, this seems to come most often out of a process of rejecting what they have experienced as the shortcomings of previously held notions of leadership. Life experience has, at different stages, added new layers of meaning about leadership. Leadership learning has been about unlearning, about working out which of these images of leadership are helpful and which should be discarded (in effect moving from disintegration to integration). So for them it was rather like peeling away layers of the onion. Participants did this in their frequent expressions of what for them leadership is ‘not’. In this way it seems that the emerging view of leadership which they express is grounded in the realities of their experiences. The process of sifting through their experience has resulted in participants rejecting past images of leadership which for them were negative, exclusive and inhibiting and, instead embracing a more affirmative, inclusive and “life giving” view. Table 2 captures the shifting perceptions and understandings of leadership as described by participants.

**CHANGING INSIGHTS/MEANINGS ABOUT LEADERSHIP**

FROM Leadership is.....	TO Leadership is .....
Intimidating and inaccessible Beyond my capability	Desirable and possible for me Possible within the capacities I have and the tools I have learnt on InterAction
Exclusive (for men, for elders, for the select few)	Inclusive (for women too, for young people too, for anyone)
Theoretical (aloof) For senior people usually in politics or in work organisations	In touch with what is happening For people in all positions in all different life communities
Being the best	Being who and what you are with the help of others
About heroic individuals	About connected networks of people working together
Being obsessed by personal power About personal gain	Mobilising power in the community About beneficial social change, it is about humanity
Influencing from the position of authority in the hierarchy About dictating	About building the capacity to influence from where you are About connecting
About order and control	About engaging chaos and complexity to create new and good things
Too big a challenge for me. Immobilises me.	A challenge for us together. Change is possible and it starts with me. It energises and mobilises me
Positional About being structural	Personal and predispositional About being genuinely authentic
Individualistic	Inter-connectedness and inter-dependence; individuals in their communities
About setting rules	About having conversations
About the leader achieving	About the leader providing an environment which enables others to achieve as well
About conveying disconnected information	About conveying meaning and possibility

**Table 2**

**Leadership for beneficial social change: stories with impact**

In the previous section we have seen how the *InterAction* programme has challenged participants to fundamentally re-evaluate their concept of leadership. Thus, whilst “African leadership” was initially



seen as distant, political and all-too-frequently associated with corruption and the abuse of power, participants are now able to conceive of leadership as being diffuse and accessible to all. Indeed, the concept of “everyone is a leader” lies at the very heart of the programme and, when assimilated, calls for more respectful, facilitative and inclusive forms of leadership action. In this section, we will now turn our attention to the practical impact of this on participants and the people around them.

At the very outset of the programme the British Council and partners recognised the power and value of stories and set out to get “1,000 stories told”. Much of this work was co-ordinated through the website and local offices and whilst it has resulted in some truly astounding stories of personal courage, perseverance and change most stories sound somewhat mundane. The same is true of the stories collected by us as part of our research yet, by hearing it directly and seeing the passion with which participants speak, the data points to something rather extraordinary within the apparently ordinary. Leadership studies has long been dominated by a fixation with heroic figures carving a dramatic path through history (take, for example, Lord Nelson, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Gandhi) yet their acts are invariably viewed in retrospect – recounted to sound dramatic, brave, wise, etc., (sometimes by themselves such as in the case of Nelson) with little consideration of how it may have appeared to others at the time. If we consider leadership as a process of intentional social influence (Yukl, 2002), however, is it not likely that the leaders’ impact is at a cognitive and emotional, as well as a behavioural level? Furthermore, if we consider leadership as distributed across the many rather than a select few (Badaracco, 2002; Drath, 2001; Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2004) aren’t the majority of leadership acts most likely to be small and incremental rather than large and transformational? With this in mind we will now recount some more tales from Africa.

Almost without exception all participants who discussed their experience through conversations and questionnaires reported significant, life-changing impacts of their participation in the *InterAction* leadership programme. The range of impacts span the whole spectrum of participants’ life experience, from self-confidence and identity, through relationships with partners, family members and friends, to the workplace and wider community. Indeed, this is one particularly striking feature of the programme: that the person is treated in a holistic manner and that equal importance is placed on their role in the family and other communities, as at work (unlike many more commercially orientated professional development programmes). In order to give a sense of the range of impacts experienced, these will be grouped under the following headings: impact on self, family, workplace, community and wider society.

### ***Impact on self***

Of the six guiding passions of the *InterAction* programme (see Table 1) the focus on “Me” was seen to be the most important by a large number of participants. In effect the importance of developing and caring for oneself was seen as a fundamental precursor to taking up one’s leadership role within a community. Thus the focus on self was not selfish but rather for the collective benefit of society:

“On the *InterAction* programme we learnt that leadership starts with understanding yourself, realising yourself, what are your strengths, what is working and even what is not working. Then you put these things together and while it is not simple or easy, it is a good way to lead people. So you lead yourself and then you can lead others.” (Male, Consultant, Tanzania)

Key elements of the impact on self included enhanced self-awareness, confidence, inter-personal skills (including listening, questioning and appreciation of the views of others), tolerance and patience.

“Before I had no confidence in questioning something because they will ask me why, who are you to be asking this? But right now I feel it is my role, to question our political leaders because they are our leaders and they are accountable to us the people. In this way they also learn from us, they become aware of our feelings and of our needs. Right now I have confidence. People ask me to be the leader and I am willing to do this because I know it is just about doing what I can do. The way I look at things now is different after *InterAction*.” (Female, Teacher, Tanzania)

At the core of this change has been a shift in personal identity whereby participants have come to recognise themselves as leaders with the potential to exert influence and bring about change no matter what their position in the system.

“I have confidence in myself now, I see myself as a leader, I can talk to people and listen to them and that I would enable them to listen to them rather than it is me who tells them what to do. That is why perhaps they have the trust in me. I think they see that I give them the confidence to make their own decisions. When people do not want to be leaders sometimes it is because they are lacking that confidence. When I give them the opportunity to make their decisions and facilitate that process it builds confidence in them. It is not the same as thinking you have to be a born leader or you have to be taught to be a leader. But even leading is a process and it involves all the people.” (Male, Student, Tanzania)

Adopting such a facilitative, inclusive approach to leadership helps to empower others. The leaders' role is seen as one of concern for, caring and developing others rather than being distant and judgemental (*cf.* Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe's (2005) notion of “nearby” and “distant” leadership and Gilligan's (1982) “ethic of concern” versus “ethic of judgement”).

### ***Impact on family***

A distinctive feature of the impact of the *InterAction* leadership programme on participants is the way in which it influences the nature of their social interactions in all aspects of their lives – personal and professional. Impacts within the immediate family environment were particularly noted and commented on and, in effect, this appeared to be one of the first places where participants began to practice and apply what they had learnt during the programme.

Many spoke of improved relationships with spouses, siblings and other family members, primarily arising from the application of principles such as “appreciation, good will and good intent” and “the magic of difference”. Giving others the benefit of the doubt reopened dialogues and enabled an enhanced appreciation of the potential contribution (and personal circumstances) of different family members.

“We grew up in my family with my father not taking care of us. He never bought me a pair of shoes a Tshirt or paid my school fund but above all he was abusive to all of us including my mother, physically and emotionally. I had a great anger upon him. I never wanted anything to do with him because of that but because of the TICing model [*a model of communication developed by QoD and used on the InterAction programme*] I looked into him and asked myself how was he raised was he loved by his family? Was he recognised as a person who may do something for himself? Most of the things were not there he was never loved even by his mother, she turned his sisters against him, he was very much rejected so he grew up like that. Then I asked myself this question: "How can he love if he was never loved" everything that he did was of the impact his growing up life style had on him. My father is not stupid, he does not hate us, it is just that he does not know how to love. I took a big step I FORGAVE HIM for everything and started to look at him as somebody who needs to be loved - guess what it worked! It can not happen overnight but we are now growing closer together and the others are following as well. Sometimes he seems to be worse but he is changing gradually. He will even say nice words about us and my mother and it feels so good. The TICing model is working to understand other people and yourself - do not just talk or conclude on anything without checking the TICing model.” (Female, Community Development Manager, South Africa)

There are also examples of where participants have acted as mentors for siblings and other family members

“My brother who is 20 years old, for example, has no confidence. I gave him the questions I was given in InterAction to reflect on (what are your strengths and weaknesses, what are you proud about achieving in your life, and so on). He wanted to show me his answers and talk about them. It was a powerful conversation, the first real one I had with him, because he was so honest and he was so shocking about the way he felt. I think that was a bit like I had felt too like a loser with no confidence, although not so much as he did [...] So I thought I would make it my mission to talk with him about what was happening to me in InterAction. One day I gave him some money to go and deposit in the bank, into my account for me. He could not believe that I had done that. Nobody trusts him [...]. We never gave him a chance. He was so excited that I did not think he would lose it. When he came back I did not expect him to talk to me about it, but he told me about the whole process, the forms he had to fill in. It was a big boost to his confidence, his morale.”(Female, Sales Executive, Tanzania)

And for others, the family is a powerful source of support, but one that needs to be worked at:

“First I am a leader of myself. And you have to be that same leader in all your communities. I am an activist a women’s activist, a HIV/Aids activist. I am an activist and I have to take that with me wherever I go. But you cannot do it on your own. You need support, psychological, financial, emotional support. I get this from my husband. If members of your family do not understand what you are doing because you are not there and they think you should be doing other things you will be worrying about that and involved in family quarrels. I have had to work at doing this, with some members of my family showing them how what I am doing by not being at home will help all of us. It doesn’t just come.” (Female, Member of Parliament, Tanzania)

### ***Impact at work***

Other than family, the workplace is perhaps the community in which participants felt there had been the greatest impact of their changing approach to leadership and inter-personal relations due to the amount of time spent there. Most of these impacts involved arose from the increased personal capacities outlined above, leading to career progression, improved working relationships and a greater appreciation of the contribution of others.

“Before InterAction, I believed so much in myself that I never believed in any other person. Of course this left me with so much headache and undue deadlines to meet. I had an unfair share of official responsibilities which could have been comfortably and effectively delegated. With InterAction, I am able to appreciate that my colleagues could do well also, or even better than me given the chance. I provided the opportunity and amazingly, they can do many things better than myself, and they get better with more enabling environment created. The result? My headaches have become reduced, less deadlines to meet, improved output, more satisfaction among my colleagues and more progress for the organisation.” (Male, Development Worker, Nigeria)

As indicated in the previous quote, this change in style has been well appreciated by colleagues and bosses and, in effect, started a ripple effect throughout the organisation.

“As the Executive Director of the NGO, I have not only developed the ability to relate well with managers of bigger corporate organizations, but I have started a mentoring process to prepare others to succeed me with time. My colleagues in the office give me feedback in these areas all the time and with the community networking going on now, my office has become an “interaction” office.” (Male, Researcher and NGO Director, Ghana)

### ***Impact on community***

Besides work and family, many of the participants are engaged in other social communities (including church, schools, women’s groups, community projects, etc.), where they have found other channels to apply their learning from the programme.

“It has been wonderful, at home, at work, even on the pulpit when I am preaching I now find myself ending my sermons with powerful life-giving questions. What I have noticed is that there has been a change in my approach to people and issues.” (Male, CEO of IT Company and Lay-Pastor, Nigeria)

“The fact is that as a woman in my tradition you cannot challenge or question decisions by men. I have tried to change this. By using appreciation, goodwill and good intention and through questioning by letting them know they are doing great things but things will be better if the women participate. Through my influence as a leader of a female association we have done this by examples of handling projects in the community where we have proved our worth. The women are now taking a leading role in community projects, which has improved a lot their status in the community.” (Female, HR Director and President of Women’s Association, Cameroon)

“As an individual I believe the programme has boosted my confidence in handling leadership issues with a great deal of humility, passion for the good of my society and always seeking the best for the bodies and communities I represent.” (Male, Agronomist and Research Scientist, Ghana)

A central part of the *InterAction* programme is the concept of leadership within community and participants are encouraged to identify communities where they have influence (indeed, this actually forms part of the selection process). In order to practice engaging at the community level the programme comprises an experiential element where participants spend time engaging with local communities. These engagements typically involve a small group of *InterAction* participants spending up-to one day within the chosen community interacting with a wide range of people, asking questions, sharing insights and offering a positive appreciation of the work being done. Within the current paper there is insufficient space to enter into a detailed description of the kinds of impact that can be achieved in this short time but, suffice it to say the changes can be substantial, transformational and sustained. For example, two months after engagement with an artisanal collective in Zambia, the community had purchased a vehicle (something previously considered impossible) to enable the transportation of materials and access to a small farmstead recently purchased on the outskirts of the city; the women’s group in the village has started running classes on traditional practices (such as female initiations) for members of the local city community; villagers were looking to implement regular dance performances for locals and tourists; and a member of the community management committee had gained a place on the next round of the *InterAction* programme.

### ***Impact on wider society***

Not surprisingly, through these changes at a local level, participants are starting to have an impact within the wider society – national, regional and international. Much of this impact is achieved in the same way as in local communities – through listening, questioning, appreciation, tolerance and self-confidence – and arises primarily from changes in self-identity in relation to community. For many, however, they now see their position within society in a broader context than their immediate local communities. Some participants have been moved to stand for parliament, seeing their potential to influence national policy; others are developing regional and international networks within and beyond Africa; others are using their positions in the media, broadcasting and other domains to share the *InterAction* message with a wider audience; and nearly all have re-engaged with their identity as Africans.

This embracing of African identity brings us back to the earlier section of this paper where we explored the connotations and meanings of “African Leadership” and leads us into our discussion and conclusions.

## Discussion and conclusions

Our research on the *InterAction* leadership programme has revealed a wide range of issues and concepts about leadership in Africa that warrant further exploration and elaboration. Sadly there is insufficient space to explore all of these in the current paper, however, a number of substantial points do stand out.

Firstly, it has become evident that this form of research (i.e. narrative action research) in this kind of setting (i.e. Africa) has important things to reveal about the **nature of leadership**. This research and the stories collected reveal that it is the small things that matter. That leadership is the glue that connects and holds people and communities together yet, like glue, it can be almost imperceptible to the naked eye. It is the thread that runs throughout and is more frequently revealed within subtle, incremental actions rather than dramatic transformational change. As Tolstoy (1997) memorably reminds us, “to study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, we must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved”. Indeed, even within the West there is an awakening to the importance of “quiet leadership”, “servant leadership” and “distributed leadership” and one might argue that this is simply being reflected in the responses from Africa, yet we feel there is something fundamentally more pressing about these issues in the African context. Africa is a nation beset with challenges (many externally imposed) and the only credible response is one of collective effort whereby the masses are encouraged and supported to take up their leadership roles. In response to the question “how do you eat and elephant?” the response in Africa is not only “one bite at a time” but “get everyone to take a bite”!

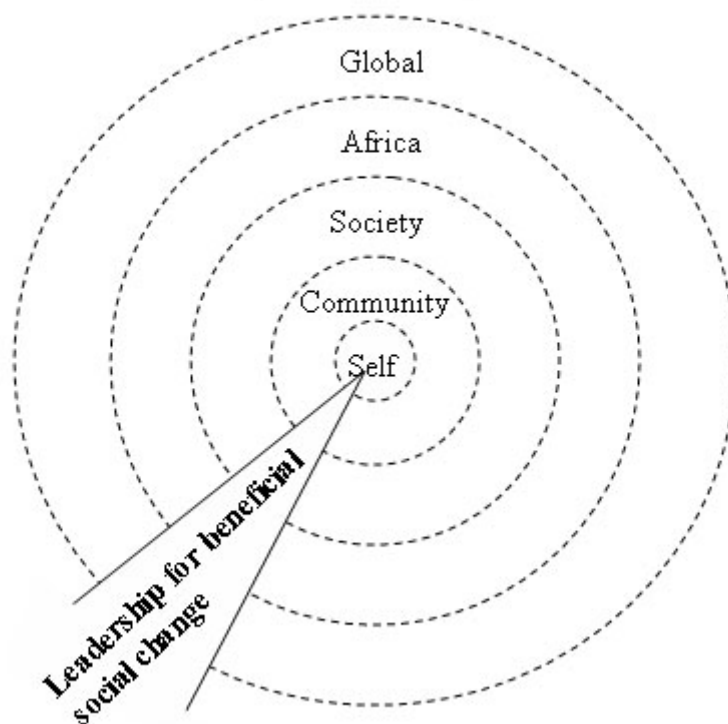
A second set of issues and implications surround the **context of leadership**. Whilst it is easy to argue against the inexorable shift towards “global” styles of management and leadership (typically US in origin) and tempting to romanticise more “traditional” practices neither is necessarily inevitable nor desirable. Our exploration of the concept of “African leadership”, for example, has revealed much that is inspirational and desirable, but also much that is destructive and undesirable. The same is also true of mainstream Western leadership and management theory and practice. The phrase “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” thus springs to mind – how can we use what’s most helpful, no matter where it comes from? There is a tendency to think of African culture as “other than” or “different from” Western culture and vice-versa yet such a stance seriously hinders a true appreciation of the multi-cultural nature of the societies in which we live. Jackson (2004) argues that Africa has long been multi-cultural and, as such, is typified by “hybrid” forms of management and organisation whereby different cultural forms co-exist side-by-side as a kind of multiple dualism and can (and should) never be fully unravelled. Perhaps similar realisations in Western countries could alleviate some of the alienation and disillusionment felt by minority groups in our own societies (such as alluded to in the introduction).

And a third set of issues surround the **application of leadership**. Our research in Africa has indicated that leadership begins with accepting and taking up one’s role within a community (or social) context. By viewing the concept of “self in community” as the essential building block of shared or distributed leadership we can re-personalise these notions, thus moving away from abstract, diffuse and distant representations to an appreciation of how humans interact within a social milieu. This does not represent a return to psychological theories of leadership but acknowledges the importance of recognising one’s position within a social system and the opportunities that this affords for taking up a leadership role. Indeed, within an African context, such a perspective is rooted in the concept of *Ubuntu* (humanness), a Nguni/Zulu word often translated as “I am because we are”. This is a philosophy of coexistence, whereby a person can only be conceived of *in relation* to others, which offers as powerful a challenge to Cartesian philosophy as does the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang (see Louw, 1998 for a description of the philosophical underpinnings of ubuntu and Van Der Colff, 2002, for its application to management and leadership).

These points are represented graphically in Figure 1, which offers a conceptual framework of leadership and identity in Africa.

- **Self** is placed at the centre of the diagram as it is from here that the leadership role is taken up. It is the process of identifying oneself as a leader and the potential to influence the system from within that is the first step to bringing about change.
- **Community** is taken to comprise the local communities in which the person interacts on a regular basis: family, work, religion, community groups, etc.
- **Society** is taken to comprise the wider social context in which the person and their communities are situated: national, regional, ethnic/tribal, etc.
- **Africa** is taken to represent meaningful transnational groupings, such as sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa, East Africa, Southern and Central Africa.
- **Global** is taken to represent the interconnections with other groupings outside Africa, including the African Diaspora, ex-colonialists, international stakeholders (including businesses, aid agencies and academic partners), etc.
- **Leadership for beneficial social change** is represented as a connecting thread that runs throughout the various levels and identities, holding them together.
- **Boundaries** are represented with dotted lines as they are taken to be permeable, shifting and co-existing. They also represent ripples of mutual influence between self and communities.

### **Leadership and Identity in Africa**



**Figure 1**

This diagram offers a somewhat simplistic representation of leadership identities and the processes of impact and engagement within Africa yet we feel that it offers a useful starting point for understanding the inter-connectedness of self, community and leadership. These ideas will be further explored in forthcoming papers.

To conclude, as we proceed into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and seriously address issues of inequality it essential that we not only take account of but also celebrate our different legacies, heritages and indigenous practices in order to better appreciate and understand the multitude of ways in which notions such as leadership can be understood and expressed. This is not only beneficial for the recipients of Western

management and leadership theory but will also help to expand and refresh our own world-view – offering new insights into the phenomenon of leadership and its pivotal role in social change.

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<sup>iii</sup> Please note that the passions and principles were developed by Questions of Difference in conjunction with the African partners and remain the intellectual property of QoD. The eight assumptions are based on Cooperrider's principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, and Srivastva, 1987).

<sup>iv</sup> Please note that the word "transformational" is used in the sense of transformation/change rather than "transformational leadership" as described by Bass (1985).