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"I See You!" – The Zulu Insight to Caring Leadership

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Abstract

Although the role of leaders in building relationships with team members has been well-established as a foundation for improved performance (Beer, 2009), the complex challenges in directing the modern organization in a highly competitive global marketplace often mean that leaders of organizations are more focused on tasks rather than people. Nonetheless, a growing body of research about the importance of leader-member relationships confirms that leaders who demonstrate a caring commitment to the welfare of organization members also create organizations that are more profitable, more innovative, and more effective at meeting customer needs (Cameron, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Introduction

Insights from the Zulu, a Bantu ethnic group in South Africa, and that group's common greeting of *Sawubona*, provide powerful evidence of the importance of the leader's role in acknowledging, validating, and truly understanding colleagues and followers as they create organizations committed to shared goals. The purpose of this paper is to explain the nuances of that Zulu greeting and to equate that term to the ways in which today's leaders can better establish their own relationships with the employees whom they lead and serve. We begin by explaining the precise meaning of *Sawubona* in the Zulu language and identify four important elements of the phrase that are communicated. We then examine each of those four elements as part of the leader-follower relationship and present eight propositions about the application of those elements and their positive impacts on today's highly competitive organizations. We conclude the paper with a summary of the practical applications of this paper for today's leaders and a charge to leaders to incorporate the spirit of *Sawubona* as they strive to create stronger relationships and more successful organizations.

Meaning of *Sawubona*

The African greeting, "I see you," is common to several cultures and reflects the importance of acknowledging others and seeing value in the present moment (Bishop, n. d.). The term *Sawubona* encompasses far more than the casual greeting of "Hello," which is sometimes

a cursory acknowledgement and a trite but necessary formality in Western cultures. The greeting represents the Zulu philosophy of *ubuntu*, which translates as "humanity toward all."

Ubuntu is a spiritual ethic that advocates mutual support for "bringing each other into existence." To practice *ubuntu* is to help your brothers and sisters remember their true identity, recognize their true value, and participate fully. *Ubuntu* teaches that our purpose is to be a true friend to one another. Through *ubuntu*, we bring out the best in ourselves and others — "a training in true leadership." In explaining the true nature of *Sawubona*, Oliver Bishop explained that the term conveys the interconnectedness of people, their need for freedom to be "present with" others, and the importance of each person's inherently sacred value.

Sawubona reminds leaders of the importance of not simply viewing employees in terms of tasks and roles they perform, but rather make efforts to see and understand who others really are (Naseer T, 2014). It is therefore fundamentally essential for leaders to nurture relationships with followers and to understand what matters to each person and how every individual can contribute in a meaningful way to an organization's shared purpose. It is this far more comprehensive nature of *Sawubona* that offers valuable insights into the leader's role in redefining their relationships with others in a way that fully demonstrates the capacity to manage change, lead others, and achieve unprecedented results for individuals and organizations.

Elements of *Sawubona*

Implicit within the concept of *Sawubona* are four key elements of a leader's relationship with others. In this section we identify each of those four elements, define their importance of each element in the leadership relationship by citing the leadership literature, and suggest eight propositions associated with these four elements and their implications for individuals and organizations.

Empowering Others: Sawubona implicitly incorporates the witnessing by one person of the value of another and affirms their linkage in history and in their place in the world (Bishop). In explaining the nature of *Sawubona*, de Jager (2005) explained that the term acknowledges, validates, and recognizes the uniqueness of others – thereby empowering them and affirming their importance rather than simply their existence. The Zulu saying that reinforces the interdependence of relationships*, Umuntu ngumuntu nagabantu*, affirms the identity of others and verifies that a person is a person because of other people (de Jager, 2005).

The greeting does far more than express an acknowledgement, but also frames the other person as having divine potential, a place in history, and witnessing their uniqueness and value (Bishop). Consistent with the nature of psychological empowerment, *Sawubona*, validates an individual at four levels:

1. *Meaning* – Acknowledging the importance of individuals, their inherent value, and the contribution that they make to the world.
2. *Competence* – Affirming the ability, capacity, and/or skill of an individual to perform a worthy task or achieve a desired outcome.

3. *Self-Determination* – Recognizing that the individual is free within accepted parameters to govern his or her self with autonomy.
4. *Impact* – Validating the significance of the actions and works being engaged in of an individual (cf. D'Innocenzo, Luciano, Mathieu, Maynard, & Chen, 2016).

This component of the Zulu greeting is consistent with the empowering obligation that leaders assume in their relationships with followers.

Empowering others is widely recognized as a contributing element of effective leadership and enhances within individuals their self-efficacy and confidence in making a valued contribution (Fong & Snape, 2015). Cameron, (2011) explained that empowering others is a key element of responsible leadership and, though rare, is a vital moral obligation that enhances both the outcomes of organizations and the growth of individuals. Rather than focusing on a high control model that often undermines initiative and creativity (cf. Pfeffer, 1998), empowering leadership seeks to enable and assist others to recognize their highest potential and thereby inspire them to strive to achieve the best within themselves (Covey, 2004, p. 98).

Mary Parker Follett (2013) described this willingness to empower others as a "power with" rather than a "power over" relationship. Follett had explained that controlling others was far less effective than truly integrating with them and creating a partnership based upon 1) creating a uniting relationship, 2) incorporating two-way candor to enhance mutual understanding and trust, and 3) viewing one's actions as part of an integrated whole rather than as separate or incremental. Thus, Follett (2013) described the successful leader as one who inspires the best in others, who clarified meaning and focus, and who unified and concentrated the effectiveness of an organization.

Propositions 1 and 2 are consistent with the nature of *Sawubona* and the research about empowering leadership.

P$_1$: Leaders who adopt an empowering relationship with employees are viewed as more ethically responsible than leaders who do not adopt this leadership approach.

P$_2$: Organizations with leaders who adopt an empowering relationship with employees are more profitable than organizations with leaders who do not adopt this leadership approach.

Acknowledging Mutuality: The essence of *Sawubona* includes the acknowledgement of the mutuality of the relationship between the individuals involved. Bishop (2006) explained that *Sawubona* encompasses an invitation to participate in each other's lives to become one's best in the pursuit of optimal outcomes. This acknowledgement of the obligation to give others what they need is a fundamental element of *Sawubona* (Romero, 2010) and is considered a covenantal requirement of servant leadership (DePree, 2004).

In the evolving leadership literature, Vanvugt, Hogan, and Kaiser (2008) argued that leaders and followers are inherently interconnected and required understanding that relationship together rather than separately. Just as *Sawubona* views acknowledging the importance of the pursuit of mutual freedom (Bishop, 2006), transformational leadership recognizes the importance of synergistically achieving organizational success and the enhancement of each individual's capabilities in a constantly changing world (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Malakayan (2014) emphasized the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of leaders and followers and Hayes and colleagues (2015) clarified the critical importance of that mutuality in creating follower ownership, commitment, and trust. The validation and affirmation of mutuality transcends accepting others and acknowledging their unique worth but also demonstrates that the leader understands his or her dependence upon others for the success of a venture and for his/her own success -- in addition to benefiting followers as well (Clarke & Mahidi, 2017).

Propositions 3 and 4 address the relationships between mutuality of relationships between leaders and followers.

> P_3: Leaders who demonstrate sensitivity to the mutuality of relationships with employees are viewed as more trustworthy than leaders who do not adopt this leadership approach.

> P_r: Organizations with leaders who demonstrate their understanding of the mutuality of relationship with employees are more profitable than organizations with leaders who do not adopt this leadership insight.

Honoring Uniqueness: Sawubona acknowledges the uniqueness and value of each individual and the nobility of purpose of individuals and organizations (Bishop, 2006). Edwards (2014) added that the greeting was intended to affirm the greatness in people. In addition, de Jager (2005) suggested that *Sawubona* affirmed both the closeness of the relationship and the regard in which the person "being seen" is perceived.

In the same way that the Zulu acknowledge the importance of others, Martin Buber (2002), the Austrian philosopher, explained that individuals must be viewed as highly-regarded and individual "Yous" rather than as fungible and collective "Its." Beer (2009) explained that organizations seeking high performance and high employee commitment needed to create organizational systems that valued employees as the source of value creation — and demonstrating that perception by establishing integrated high performance and high trust systems, policies, and practices that affirmed each employee's individual worth.

Peter Block (2013) was one of a host of other scholars who similarly emphasized the importance of treating employees as valued "owners and partners" who are owed stewardship obligations by their employers (cf. Bernstein, Buse, & Bilimoria, 2016; Hernandez, 2008 & 2012; Caldwell, Hayes, Karri, & Bernal, 2008). Caldwell and Floyd (2014) have cited evidence demonstrating that organizations that treat employees with high regard, dignity, and respect are measurably more productive and profitable than similar organizations that treat them as partners in a simply transactional relationship.

Applying the insights from leadership findings, Proposition 5 and 6 address the importance of honoring employees as unique individuals.

> P_5: Leaders who honor employees as valued individuals are considered more effective leaders than those who do not treat employees in this way.

> P_6: Organizations with leaders who honor employees as valued individuals are more profitable than organizations with leaders who do not adopt this leadership approach.

Caring Personally: Bishop (2006) explained that *Sawubona* demonstrated a profound level of personal caring that recognized the divine capabilities of another person, witnessed to their inherent greatness, and affirmed their worth. Acknowledging the humanity of others and the sacredness of the human condition, the French philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (2004), similarly explained that "(w)e are not human beings having spiritual experiences but spiritual beings having human experiences."

The importance of treating others with a view toward their worth and greatness has been frequently expressed by leadership scholars. Quinn (1996) affirmed the importance of leaders treating others with the recognition of their potential greatness. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) emphasized the importance of leaders creating a deeply personal relationship that resonates with others and empowers them to excel. Other scholars (Pava, 2003; DePree, 2004; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; Caldwell, 2012) have recognized the nature of leadership as a "covenantal relationship" in which leaders owe followers a profound set of moral obligations and personal obligations.

Covey (2005, p. 98) emphasized the importance of the leader caring about others and demonstrating a commitment to the welfare growth and wholeness of others by helping them to find their voice, discover their greatness, and thereby achieve their best possible version of themselves. Great leaders recognize that the ability to connect with others is far more than a cognitive clarification of duties or a set of technical skills but includes a far deeper affective acknowledgement of the importance of each individual as a valued person with almost limitless potential (Secretan, 2005; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002).

Propositions 7 and 8 are consistent with this fourth element of the nature of *Sawubona* and its link to successful leadership.

> **P7:** Leaders who demonstrate a personal caring to employees are considered more effective leaders than those who do not treat employees in this way.

> **P8:** Organizations with leaders who demonstrate personal caring in their relationships with employees are more profitable than organizations with leaders who do not adopt this leadership approach.

Positive Impacts on Others

Leadership research has affirmed that treating employees with the four elements of a *Sawubona* perspective can create powerful relationships (McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnson, 2008), increase trust and follower commitment (Hayes, *et al.*, 2015; Caldwell & Hansen, 2010), and produce more successful organizations (Beer, 2009). That research also suggests that leaders who view the world and their moral obligations as an ethical stewardship honor the duties owed to individual followers, their organizations, and the larger community (Caldwell, Bischoff, & Karri, 2002; Caldwell, 2012).

The *Sawubona* perspective incorporates much more than treating others with kindness (DePree, 2004), demonstrating caring (Autry, 1992; Peck, 2003), or conveying authentic respect (Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F., 2005). The perspective invites others to discover themselves (Covey, 2004; Hasan & Caldwell, 2016), honor individual identities (Hayes & Caldwell, 2016), and make a better world (Bishop, 2006).

In keeping with the spirit of **Sawubona**, Marianne Williamson (1992, pp. 190-191) provided an insight into the potential within each of us, coupled with our ironic reluctance to recognize our own potential.

> *Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you* not *to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

Sawubona acknowledges the great value of the person to whom one speaks, and its message encompasses the leader's obligation to help others to see themselves more clearly, to embrace their own greatness, and to then use their potential in the service of others and in the pursuit of a noble purpose in life (cf. Atwijuka & Caldwell, 2017).

Practical Applications for Leaders

Understanding the value of *Sawubona* and its rich meanings provides four important practical applications for today's leaders.

1) *It conveys the importance of individuals as value contributors.* Many organizational leaders mistakenly view employees as cost centers when, in fact, those same individuals actually create the added value which an organization delivers to its customers. *Sawubona* affirms the inherent worth of all persons, their ability to create value, and their fundamental importance.

2) *It confirms the leader's covenantal obligation to teach, serve, and create new meanings in partnerships with others.* By affirming the worth of all individuals, *Sawubona* honors the interrelatedness of individuals and their obligations to each other to discover new insights and to make a better world through cooperative effort – moral duties inherent in the nature of covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003).

3) *It affirms the importance of a caring, interpersonal, and affective leadership style that seeks to connect with others and to inspire them to become their best.* Leaders owe a transformational duty to others that transcends simply creating profits for organizations, but that includes demonstrating a commitment to each individual's welfare, growth, and wholeness (Covey, 2005; Burns, 2010; Hasan & Caldwell, 2016). *Sawubona* emphasizes the caring, interpersonal, and others-honoring moral obligation of leadership.

4) *It aligns with the need for a new, a higher, and a transformative commitment to relationships that has been missing in human relationships.* Bennis and Nanus (2007) have called for such a "transformative" new leadership perspective and empirical evidence consistently affirms that lack of trust by which today's leaders are currently viewed in virtually every type of organization from businesses, to government, to academia, and even to religious institutions (Anderson, Ndalamba, & Caldwell, 2017).

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