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The Last Word
The promises of *ubuntu* communication

As an organisational anthropologist I was very enthusiastic about the philosophy of the *ubuntu* concept when I heard and read about it a couple of years ago. It gave words and meaning to many of my experiences during long stays in different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The concept has a strong metaphoric power for African-based organisational and management theories, as opposed to Eurocentric and Americacentric ones: 'We Africans will develop our own theories, based on our typical African authenticity and you, westerners can learn from us'. Instead of thinking in dichotomies, as we so typically do, it is possible and more fruitful to stress togetherness and the Rainbow Nation: instead of 'or – or' 'and – and'; taking the African Renaissance as a starting point.

Afrocentricity is a concept that has gained popularity both in Africa and among African Americans in North America. Afrocentric management, particularly the concept of *ubuntu*, is a powerful tool in claiming its own, authentic place in the series of management ideologies in post-apartheid South Africa. The country has seen much progress. Yet, structural inequalities seem to persist. I wonder what values the *ubuntu* concept has against this background. Neglecting this world of different and fragmented meanings and interests in a highly urban and globalised economy by pinpointing the alleged historically authentic background of all black Africans will probably rather favour the emerging rich and powerful ones instead of the have-nots. Focusing too strongly on the *ubuntu* concept and the philosophy of the African Renaissance can result in a process of depoliticisation and thereby mystification of the everyday struggle of people living in a state of poverty.

Ubuntu implies a humanised social democratic form of living and working together. In such a world attention is required for these conflicts that are part of the reality of everyday life, not to suppress these. However, *ubuntu* authors seem to relate the concept strongly to a classical anthropological concept of culture. It is a concept that stresses shared values, harmony and consensus. It stresses the interest of the community, of the group, and of the tribe. This understanding of culture is one-sided. It overlooks the many contradictions, ambiguities and power relations that are always part of human societies, groups and organisations.

Placing *ubuntu* in the tradition of the classical culture concept as a basis for theories and practices of management fits in 'how-to' management literature like the bestsellers of Ouchi (1981), Peters and Waterman (1982) and Deal and Kennedy (1982). Such prescriptive theories say much about

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becoming successfully managed 'corporate tribes', not about what really happens in organisations. Undoubtedly, an African context differs from the Western or Eurocentric context. *Ubuntu* might be promising since it is an African philosophy. As I noted, Africans are probably much more community minded than the individualised people in the West, and as such, think democratically how to reach harmony and consensus. However, (South) Africa is (now) no longer an island, but part of a global 'Empire' in which many (want to) live like we do in Europe, privately and certainly in firms and organisations. The differences match striking similarities. It is somehow ironic to see *ubuntu* adepts appeal for the same values as their Western counterparts whom they criticise so vehemently while trying to mask historical and structural contradictions and struggles within societies and organisations.

Ubuntu philosophy informs us about many aspects of a past and probably even contemporary village life in Southern Africa. But the danger of stressing the traditional values of *gemeinschaft* is that such emphasis mystifies and obscures other conflicts in the present South African *gesellschaft*. The image of Africa is the paradox of the intensely felt friendliness and hospitality of people, as I so often experienced, versus the struggle for life and the intensely felt inequalities of resources, of power, both in the past and today. Within and between all groups power and interest differences and diversities always exist. This is why the discussion on organisational theories, including the concepts of culture and communication, should not concentrate on further delineating differences between Western and African management, but on management (concepts) and their presuppositions in general.

At the heart of *ubuntu* is solidarity. But what does solidarity mean when, on the one hand, people are expelled from their homes because they suffer from Aids or live in deep poverty in slums, and, on the other hand, their 'brothers' drive around in their Mercedes or BMW cars and lock themselves in every night, secure behind high walls and sturdy gates? Is this as integral a part of African culture as it is of Western culture?

To me it seems to be a little naïve to isolate the promises of *ubuntu* from all these influences from abroad. On the other hand, communicating the concept within the realities of everyday life might help to develop in a humane fashion a world in which everyone counts, is given opportunities and is listened to. There is nothing wrong with these ideas as such. They could make life more agreeable. In this way communication is essential for *ubuntu* to be(come) successful and, indeed, also to hold promise for the West, as long as its liberating, transformative power is dominant in such communication. This power would become even stronger when *ubuntu* adepts join hands with critical academics, both in the West and in Africa, who study and discuss management and organisational processes.