ubuntukenosismutuality

Finding the Other in Southern African Business Leadership

By Corné J. Bekker

In Southern Africa, a desperate need exists for indigenous, innovative, values-based leadership approaches that will mobilize...

business leaders around the common goal of reconstructing a society. Through racial discrimination, disease, economic injustices, corruption, and leadership failure, this emerging paradigm of leadership has helped South Africans begin to think of leadership as something that is done in community rather than through a privileged individual. This

shift from individualism to perspectives in communal leadership is a global phenomenon. Jean Lipmen-Blumen notes that with the competitive leadership approaches of the past "We (have) finally begun to re-examine more critically our traditional concept of leadership." He describes these past approaches to leadership as outmoded and based on

egoistic ideals that promote competition, control, aggression and self-reliance. In contrast, the shift to values-based leadership approaches is mostly marked by communal presence, trust, dialogue and mutuality.

Therefore further exploration of this shift and its implication for South African

business leaders is warranted.

The African social philosophy of ubuntu and the Christian theological concept of kenosis are rich in definition and provide an ideal contextual platform for further examining values-based leadership approaches in business.

Ubuntu

This social practice of affective community, ubuntu, is not a concept that is easily distilled. Its superficial adoption by corporate South Africa has not helped to foster a deeper appreciation of its inherent values of interconnectedness, foundational humanity and responsibility to all. A correct way of thinking about ubuntu is to consider it as a basic approach to Southern African spirituality that is manifested in mutuality, solidarity with

compassion, reciprocity, solidarity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interest of building communities with justice and mutual caring. More than a descriptor of African values, ubuntu should be seen as a social philosophy and a spirituality that is deeply embedded in African culture. It is the primary foundation of a South African religious worldview.

An ubuntu–inspired approach to leadership sees community rather that self-determination as the essential aspect of personhood. Thus, the accomplishments of the individual (leader) are the accomplishments of the community (organization). South African leaders inspired by ubuntu see their inclusive approach to leadership and business as part of their larger quest for identity.

ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own." The value and practice of mutuality in ubuntu is defined paradoxically by the differences found in the other.

Accommodation and respect for the differences in the other flow from a recognition of the common humanity of the self and the other that in turn facilitates an interior transformation that allows for the radical decisions of mutuality that some South Africans business leaders have made. "Ubuntu… is an acknowledgement of the human status of another person," writes as Joe Teffo. "You are, I am members of one and the same race, namely, the human race. The essence of man lies in the recognition of man as man before financial, political, and social factors are taken into consideration. Man is an end

---

UBUNTU **VALUES**

- People-Centered
- Humble
- Caring
- Polite
- Tolerant
- Considerate
- Hospitable
- Attitude of Mutuality

KENOSIS **VALUES**

- Voluntary Self Limitation
- Vulnerability
- Present to Other
- Voluntary Powerlessness
- Humility
- Self-Sacrifice
- Openness to the Other
- Purification from Self-Centeredness

---

all and communal enterprise. It is part of the very fabric of indigenous Southern African spiritual and intellectual identity.

Ubuntu, has the power to effect a revitalized commitment in South Africans in the reconstruction of organizations marked by integrity and mutuality. Leaders with the inherent values of ubuntu, as it might relate to business, have been described as having a broad social and emotional repertoire.

The Social Philosophy of Ubuntu

The South African Nguni word ubuntu, from the adage; "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu – A person is a person because/through others," is described in African culture as the capacity to express

It is in the context of community that an African person is defined. The South African Venda saying, "Muthu u bebelwa munwe – A person is born for the other," captures the spirit of this approach of interdependence between self and community. This is more than mere interdependence as the identity of the self is defined in finding the other in community. By entering into honest dialogue and taking steps to relocate the self in mutuality with the other, the self is also enriched and formed.

This relocation of the self in mutuality with others is more than just social, it includes economic and familial decisions. The South African author, D.J. Louw builds on this premise and notes, "Ubuntu inspires us to expose

in himself and not a means."

The spirituality of mutuality in ubuntu, as it has influenced South African business leaders, allows for the breaking down of the superficial and artificial barriers between the individuals in the community and allows them to see the other and discover their mutual humanity. In doing so, this fosters a caring community that allows for the respectful tolerance of social, cultural, economic and philosophical differences.

The Construct of Kenosis

The Christian theological construct of kenosis is developed from the occurrence of the Greek word *kenao* in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11),

where it describes the voluntary self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation.

Kenosis, as an ethical construct of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, speaks of a very specific belief in the mode of God's interaction with the world. In the doctrine of incarnation, the Christian claim is that God actually lived the life of a man in Jesus of Nazareth and thus the kenosis of God in Christ provides an ethical and philosophical mode of leadership that is based on voluntary abasement and mutuality with all of humankind. Any musings on the values of kenosis ride on the belief in a present and actively-involved God.

The philosophy of kenosis, building on the doctrinal tenets of the incarnation, positions itself in a recognition and appreciation of a specific culture. Appropriating the values of kenosis in leadership requires the identification and acceptance of the social and cultural locality of the self and the other as the beginning point in (re)building just and inclusive communities.

Interpreted in readings of Philippians 2:5-11, Christian leaders interpreted the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applied its meaning within their own temporal context.

Kenosis was often seen as a mystical communion with the kenotic Christ that led to personal transformation of both the leader and follower and enabled them to practice kenosis (self-emptying) as Christ did. This resolute divesting of the prestige and power inherent in the leadership transaction enables the leader and follower to enter into a new union that is marked by equality and service. The missiologist, Yves Raguin, commenting on kenosis explains it this way, "Kenosis, then, is the gateway to mutual understanding, and beyond this, to an intimate sharing that is the consummation of a relationship in union…By dispossession of self we are able to absorb the amazing riches of others."

The values of kenosis allow the leader to transcend narrow selfhood, to locate the other in the mutuality of love and to truly enter into the world of the follower where the leader becomes the servant of the other. This is a state of mutual acceptance, vulnerability and receptivity. This overcoming of the separation between leader and follower finds its deepest dimension in kenotic love and self-sacrifice that negates the "dream of separateness" (in the words of American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton). Or, as Merton scholar, Jens Söring rightly observes, "The connection between kenosis and service runs far deeper than a mere recognition of the divine spark in our broken, anguished brothers and sisters... taken to its ultimate conclusion, self-emptying must logically lead to self-sacrifice."

The central value of mutuality in the theological construct of kenosis allows

> *"…Suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking up from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation."*
>
> **- Thomas Merton**

the leader to locate the follower in their mutual humanity and so find their deepest identity in a communal, redefining, liberating and empowering relationship of self-sacrificial love.

Mutuality in Kenosis and Ubuntu

South African theologians, like Jonathan Draper has observed that there are strong parallels between ubuntu and the philosophical and ethical tenets of the early Jesus movement. "The African practice of affective community, of fundamental humanity, seems to me to relate closely to what emerges from a sociological/anthropological analysis of the Jesus movement. We are human only in society; we attain full humanity only through a liberative, empowering relationship with other beings in community," notes Draper.

South African scholar, Eric Doxtader, analyzed the philosophy and praxis of Desmond Tutu. Doxtader places the theology of this national Christian leader within ubuntu and kenosis, while clearly indicating that the bridge between these two constructs is the common value of mutuality. "A centerpiece of his ubuntu theology, Desmond Tutu has relied heavily on this kenotic view to explain the value of reconciliation. An expression of human interdependence, forgiveness mirrors God's self-sacrificing love. Thus, as we recognize our dependence on God and neighbour, forgiveness appears as a productive vulnerability," says Doxtader. "The abandonment of sovereign identity allows humans to redress oppression through a relation of difference. Forgiveness overcomes sin as it strives toward mutuality. The breaking down of the middle wall of partition energizes the development of an alternative society," he continues.

Note how Doxtander indicates that this Christian praxis informed by ubuntu and kenosis leads to societal renewal and change. Other have noted how the philosophy of ubuntu connects with other Western ethical systems and supports the idea that locating the other in mutuality creates an ethical proximity and so facilitates personal and communal transformation.

Therefore, ubuntu and kenosis find common ground in the value of mutuality, where the wall of separation between leader and follower is removed as they locate and redefine one another in their common humanity and so set in motion a renewed ethical movement that facilitates the (re)building of a just and caring society. Incorporating the values of ubuntu and kenosis in business leadership, leaders should implement these leadership approaches marked by a determined commitment to mutuality: (a) ensuring continuous integrated development where all have equal access to education and growth opportunities; (b) creating an organizational culture of mutual respect and dignity by the acceptance and celebration of the cultural and social locality of all employees; and (c) constructing a sense of interconnectedness with all through

the consistent communication of the organization's values, visions and goals.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa and the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund are good examples of organizations that have successfully incorporated the values and ideals of ubuntu into a social movement that have made significant contributions to the rebuilding of South African society. The question remains if commercial organizations in Southern Africa will hear the call of ubuntu and kenosis to locate the common humanity of those they serve in taking stances of radical mutuality.

Summary Comments

Strong parallels exist between kenosis and the social philosophy of ubuntu. Ubuntu and kenosis, as related to business leadership, work together within the value of mutuality where both leader and follower locate the other in moments of incarnation and so enter into a redefining relationship marked by self-sacrificial love and common humanity. The parallels between ubuntu and kenosis allow for the construction of a value–based style of business leadership in Southern Africa that is both African and Christian where leader and follower attain full humanity through a liberative, empowering relationship of radical mutuality.

Dr. Corné Bekker is an associate professor for the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship at Regent University where he teaches in the doctoral programs and is actively involved in research on the use of biblical hermeneutics and spirituality to explore leadership. He holds degrees in Greek and Biblical Studies (B.A.), New Testament Theology (M.A.) and Biblical Studies (D. Litt et Phil.) from Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg. In addition, Dr. Bekker is an ordained minister and has traveled in Africa, Europe, the East and North America to present at churches, ministries, seminars and academic conferences on Christian spirituality and leadership formation. Dr. Bekker is currently completing a second doctorate in Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa and can be reached at clbekker@regent.edu.

Notes:

Doxtader, E. (2002). Works of faith, faith of works: a reflection of the truth and justification of forgiveness. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy, 16* (1-2), 50-60.

Draper, J. A. (1994). Jesus and the renewal of local community in Galilee: challenge to a communitarian Christology. *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa, 87*, 29-42.

Fleming, D. (2004). *Leadership wisdom from unlikely voices*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Kamwangamalu, M. N. (1999). Ubuntu in South Africa: a sociolinguistic perspective to a Pan-African concept. *Critical Arts 13*(2), 24.-42.

Lipman-Blumen, J. (1996). *The connective edge: Leading in an interdependent world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
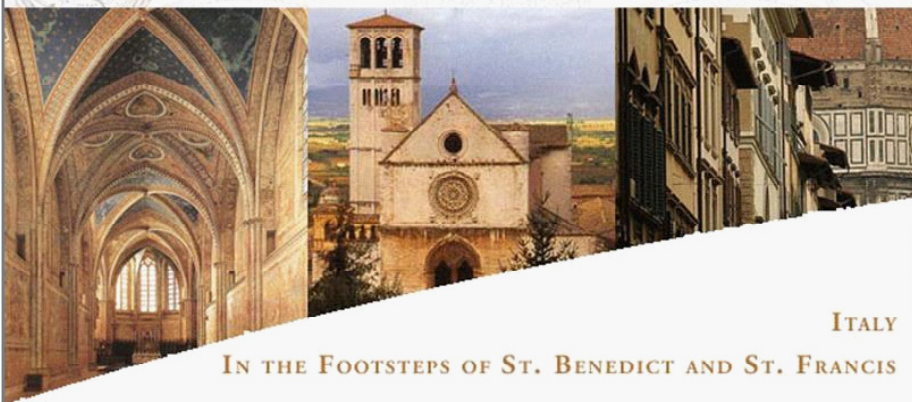
Louw, D. J. (2004). Ubuntu: an African assessment of the religious other. Paideia. Available at http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/AfriLouw.htm (n.d., retrieved January 20, 2004).

Merton, T. (1966). *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. New York: Doubleday.

Raguin, Y. (1973). *I am sending you (John 22:21): spirituality of the missioner*. Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute.

Söring, J. (2003). The kenotic convict: a divertissement on contemporary contemplative spirituality and its social context. *The Merton Annual, 16*, 152-171.

Teffo, L. J. (1998). Botho/ubuntu as a way forward for contemporary South Africa. *Word and Action, 38* (365), 3-5.

New Generation FIRO Element B

Workshop and Certification

MAY 12 -13, 2008 | VIRGINIA BEACH, VA

FIRO Element B is used worldwide in coaching, training, team building, leadership development, and organizational consulting to help practitioners accurately identify behavioral challenges and rapidly develop action plans to improve performance.

Thousands of trainers, coaches, leaders, HR and OD professionals have made FIRO Theory one of the most widely used theories of human behavior in the world.

This two-day workshop and certification qualifies you to administer and interpret Element B and use it for counseling, leader development, team-building and other consulting or research purposes. It includes:

- FIRO Theory
- Administration and Interpretation
- Individual and Group Feedback
- Improving Individual and Team Performance
- Practical Applications
- How to Present an Introductory Class
- New! Coaching Techniques Now Included

Register Today at: www.regent.edu/firo

sponsored by:

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

High Performing Systems, Inc.