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# I am Because We Are – the Contribution of the Ubuntu Philosophy to Intercultural Management Thinking

## *I am Because We Are – der Beitrag der Ubuntu-Philosophie für das interkulturelle Management-Denken*

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### **Abstract (English)**

*Intercultural management calls for a global mindset among managers and employees alike and thus people who are open, ready to learn and willing to step outside their own base culture. This type of mindset can provide a fertile backdrop upon which international actors can enlarge their repertoire of management tools and therefore their ability to act appropriately in an increasingly global and interconnected business environment.*

*In this paper, we argue that Ubuntu, a philosophy generally perceived as Sub-Saharan African, has much to offer in this context. Therefore, if intercultural management thinking is to consider 'Western' as well as 'non-Western' approaches to management, then we propose that Ubuntu should be integrated into current theories. Ubuntu is particularly relevant since it provides a counterbalance to individualistic and utilitarian philosophies that tend to dominate in the 'West'.*

*The purpose of this paper is thus to expand the understanding of Ubuntu and discuss how the values related to this philosophy can be applied in management practices well beyond Sub-Saharan Africa.*

*Keywords: Ubuntu, Intercultural Management, Management, Leadership, Corporate Culture*

### **Abstract (Deutsch)**

*Interkulturelles Management erfordert globale Denk- und Handlungsweisen. Voraussetzung dafür sind die Fähigkeit und die Bereitschaft, sich für interkulturelle Lernprozesse zu öffnen und auch vom Anderen zu lernen. Ein solches globales Mindset eröffnet Möglichkeiten, das eigene Handlungsrepertoire zu erweitern und so in einem zunehmend globalisierten und weltweit vernetzten Geschäftsumfeld angemessen und erfolgreich zu handeln.*

*Ubuntu, eine Philosophie, deren Ursprünge im südlichen Afrika zu finden sind, kann in diesem Zusammenhang einen wichtigen Beitrag leisten. Ubuntu sollte daher Teil des Repertoires eines interkulturellen Managements werden, das sowohl 'westliche' als auch 'nicht-westliche' Ansätze berücksichtigt. Dies gilt insbesondere, da es eine Alternative zu den dominant individualistisch und utilitär geprägten Philosophien der 'westlichen Welt' aufzeigt.*

*Das Anliegen dieses Aufsatzes ist es daher, das Verständnis von Ubuntu zu erweitern und zu diskutieren, wie die damit verbundenen Werte in einer Managementpraxis umgesetzt werden können, die weit über das südliche Afrika hinausgeht.*

*Schlagwörter: Ubuntu, Management, Interkulturelles Management, Führungsstil, Unternehmenskultur*

## 1. Introduction

As companies are increasingly operating across national borders, management is not just becoming international but intercultural. In addition, companies and managers are required to manage a local workforce which is becoming more diverse due to demographic changes and increased mobility, while the workforce itself needs to be able to communicate effectively with customers and personnel across national borders. Intercultural management in this context is about working within, across and between cultures in an economic and social environment characterized by a growing global interconnectedness, where economic and cultural complexity calls for new responses.

Such a task requires a mindset that acknowledges a multiplicity of perspectives, harnesses the added value that can result from increased diversity, and recognizes and respects all employees' views and aspirations. In essence, a mindset that sees cultural diversity as critical in combining and integrating different ways of doing things for a common good and in order to achieve complementarity and synergy. Through a global mindset, corporate decision-making processes can become permeable to ideas and influences from beyond the home country. A starting point to develop a global mindset is a deeper understanding of different approaches to management and an openness towards opposing ideas as well as the readiness to consciously adopt constructive interculturality while searching for the best, holistic solution in any given context.

So far, management thinking has been dominated by Western schools of management and in particular, U.S. American management styles, which can be understood as a set of philosophies and principles by which management exercises control over the workforce and binds diverse operations and functions together to achieve organizational goals. Jackson (2004:64) argues that management education throughout Africa

predominantly reflects U.S. American MBA content. In their learning, students are commonly exposed to Anglo-American management theory and are then expected to discuss its applicability in an African environment (cf. Nkomo 2011:2f.). However, management seen from a cross-cultural perspective is more concerned with the question of how to handle the complexity of a heterogeneous workforce and how to benefit from cultural diversity rather than comparing management styles or discussing issues of adaptation. In an intercultural environment, the task is to find management approaches geared towards developing a management repertoire that fits a variety of circumstances and business environments regardless of national affiliations.

Until now, the global academic management community has paid very little attention to Sub-Sahara Africa and what managers and leaders might learn from this area in the context of intercultural management. Following on from Karsten and Illa (2005), this paper stresses that the concept of Ubuntu, a normative philosophy which has its origin in Southern Africa, has a great deal to offer in this respect as it provides an alternative to individualistic and utilitarian thinking that dominates in the Western world. It is a strong community and relationship based concept of management which could help organizations to develop deeper consideration for the people who work with them and provide a basis on which to build a culture of empowerment and productive teamwork in the workplace. The underlying assumption behind Ubuntu is the understanding that promoting the good of the community means promoting the good of all. Organizations infused with humanity, a pervasive spirit of caring and community will thus, in the long run, enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage (cf. Mbigi 1995:3f.). This way of thinking requires the implementation of specific management practices and has implications for conflict management as well as developing

and maintaining harmony. All of these potentially positive aspects of Ubuntu will be explored as part of this paper.

## 2. The history and meaning of Ubuntu

Translating the term Ubuntu into one word in a Western language is difficult. It is better expressed in the proverb "I am because we are" (Poovan 2005:19) or "a person is a person because of other persons" (ibid). This focuses on the fact that our lives are bound up with the lives of others as we learn from others and need other human beings to be human. In other words, the collective We is placed before the collective I (Mbigi 1997:2), highlighting that Ubuntu is a relational philosophy. The proverbs show the emphasis on the collective human value within a community and the understanding that community is a binding and robust network of relationships. As such, Ubuntu is a philosophy based on the knowledge that individuals express compassion, reciprocity, dignity and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining common collectives (Mbigi 1995:2; Poovan et al. 2006:23-25). Accordingly, a term often used when talking about Ubuntu is "humanness" or being "human" (Sigger et al. 2010). Generally speaking, Ubuntu is oriented towards communal and relational principles, which, as Lutz (2009:314) maintains, is the cornerstone of African thought and life.

The word Ubuntu has its origin in the Nguni language family that includes Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele and thus four of the languages spoken in South Africa (Poovan 2005:15).

However, terms with the same or a similar meaning can be found in many African languages, for example in the Ndebele language *ubuthosi*. According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:85) in Congo, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda for example, the terms *bomoto*, *gimuntu*, *umunthus*, *vumuntu*, [*muntu*] and *umuntu* have the same or similar meaning. Although it would be over-generalizing to maintain that Ubuntu is something very or solely

African, it nonetheless appears that in hostile environments and the context of scarcity, concern for others and the notion of sharing in times of need is a reliable mechanism of survival (Khomba 2011:129).

Sources that mention the term Ubuntu before 1980 do so with a positive connotation and according to Gade (2011:307), terms used to describe Ubuntu were, for example, "Goodness of nature", "Good moral disposition" and "Kindness". Although there are many terms expressing the notion of Ubuntu in different parts of Africa, it is in South Africa that the term was popularized, and it became of particular relevance during the transitional period from white minority rule to black majority rule in Zimbabwe as well as in South Africa (Gade 2011:303). As such, the popularization of the term is linked to what Bolden (2014:1) refers to as the "African Renaissance", a philosophy of peace prompted by Nelson Mandela and other post-colonial and post-apartheid leaders. Gade (2011:304ff.) calls this the "narratives of return", a phrase rooted in the search for dignity and identity in postcolonial Africa. Ubuntu has several principles, including a spirit of unconditional African collective contribution, solidarity, acceptance, dignity, stewardship, compassion and care, hospitality and legitimacy (Mbigi 1997:11). Although many of the principles are embedded in the culture, they also have practical applications in management and leadership.

It was Nelson Mandela, the first president of independent South Africa, who strengthened the collectivistic notion of Ubuntu and its guiding principles for peace and reconciliation by asserting that

*the common ground of our humanity is greater and more enduring than the differences that divide us. It is so, and it must be so because we share the same fateful human condition. We are creatures of blood and bone, idealism and suffering. Though we differ across cultures and faiths, and though history has divided rich*

*from poor, free from unfree, powerful from powerless and race from race, we are still all branches on the same tree of humanity* (Mandela 2006: XXV).

He describes Ubuntu as a universal truth, a way of life which is relevant to all open societies.

Based on this thinking and worldview, Ubuntu indeed played an essential role in the making of modern democratic South Africa and the responses chosen in the light of the divisions of the Apartheid era. The overriding goal of Ubuntu, which is to promote peace through reconciliation and coexistence was a guiding principle of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Akinola / Uzodike 2018:98). The principles of Ubuntu were also prevalent in the Interim Constitution, intended to provide a historic bridge between Apartheid South Africa, characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future built on reconciliation, recognition of human rights and democracy (Gade 2011:311). The number of times the term Ubuntu was quoted in a range of official documents, especially in the transitional period, provide evidence that the Constitutional Court placed great importance on Ubuntu. This meant that it focused on understanding and reparations rather than vengeance, retaliation and victimization, as was mentioned in the epilogue, which gradually led to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Gade 2011:312f.).

It therefore comes as no surprise that in the wake of South African transition, Khoza (1992:1ff.) highlighted the necessity of an Afrocentric management to support the development of African identity and approach anchored in African culture. Mbigi, who according to Sigger et al. (2010:4) is often referred to as the founder of the Ubuntu philosophy as management practice, claims that the application of Ubuntu should serve as the foundation of Africa's cultural business renaissance

(Mbigi 1995:7ff.). Also, Karsten and Illa (2005:607) suggest positioning Ubuntu as a way of strengthening the economic revitalization of Africa. They argue in favour of a stronger role for Ubuntu, because the concept blends in well with African traditions and indigenous approaches to management. In such a context, the discourse surrounding 'African management' has to be seen and understood as a response to South Africa's long history of apartheid's political economy.

Whereas in the early days, the term Ubuntu was referred to as a human quality, sources provide evidence that towards the 1980s Ubuntu started to be linked to philosophy and this thought spread widely after the democratic elections in South Africa (Gade 2011: 316f.). This means that the usage of the term has changed in the course of history. Today, it is mainly considered a coherent management philosophy (Mangaliso / Van de Bunt 2007) which holds the potential to contribute to ethical thinking and management practices well beyond the borders of Southern Africa. This is so, because, as authors such as Jinadu (2014:186) and Khomba (2011:161) stress, the values related to Ubuntu and thus human relationships are not culture-bound.

Khomba (2011:154) emphasizes that multinational companies need to think globally when formulating their business strategies and forging partnerships overseas. They need to understand local socio-cultural realities and at the same time develop a mindset, which integrates perspectives far beyond domestic spheres. In other words, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, Ubuntu is "the gift that Africa will give the world" (Tutu quoted in Bolden 2014). As, in its essence, 'African management' as understood by those who formulated the ideas, is associated with humanity and humanness and thus the promotion of harmonious social relations. It applies to South Africa and its cultural, ethnic and socio-economic diversity as well as to the whole of Africa, if not the whole

world (Van den Heuvel 2008a:13). Although at times claimed to be uniquely African, it was a clearly expressed vision and aspiration of people like Khoza, Mbigi, and Broodryk to export Ubuntu to the management community outside of South Africa (cf. Van den Heuvel 2008a:136f.)

### **3. The concept of Ubuntu in a management context**

The conceptualization of Ubuntu is linked to social values such as solidarity, survival, compassion, dignity, respect and what Mbigi (1995:111) refers to as the collective finger theory. According to Mbigi (1995:110f.), the fingers can be seen as individual persons who act together to achieve a common goal, and at the same time, each finger stands for a value which is required and vital for such collective action. As such it shows the basic Ubuntu principles of community and togetherness, highlighting that we need cooperation in order to function in an optimal way (Molose / Goldman / Thomas, 2018:197). First and foremost, Ubuntu is therefore a relational philosophy revolving around the idea that "a person becomes a person through his/her relationship with and recognition by others" (Mangaliso / Mangaliso, 2007).

This supports the view that the strength of any community or collective depends on the relationship of its members and highlights the fundamental interdependence of humans in any social context. An example to illustrate the importance of connectedness and concern for others is a greeting common in the Shona language. Here a person would greet another by asking "Mangwani, marai sei?" meaning "Good morning, did you sleep well?" which the addressed person would respond to by saying "Ndarara, kana mararawo" or in other words "I slept well, if you slept well" (Hailey 2009:8).

A value very closely tied to the notion of relatedness and interdependence is the notion of solidarity or in other words the 'we' feeling of the community or collective. The basis for this are

the close relationships amongst members of the collective and the emphasis on the unit as a whole rather than the personal interests of the different individuals. It is the status of a person within his or her social environment which takes precedence, and the idea of the 'self' becomes entrenched in the community (Nussbaum 2003). Community belonging coupled with participation enhance the value of Ubuntu far beyond what outsiders would consider communitarianism. Furthermore, "being in a community is not a matter of belonging only, the truest form of being in a community of Ubuntu is to participate" (Forster 2006:310). Thus, the proverb "I am because we are" (Poovan 2005:23) with the understanding that the community can achieve more than the sum of the individuals' efforts. Such a feeling of solidarity can enhance team spirit and thus the cohesion of the team or collective. It could even be argued that this is a necessary precondition for commitment. Alternatively, if we take it one step further, it means sharing the understanding that as a team more can be achieved than if everyone works for him or herself (Sigger et al. 2010:13). On an organizational level, this also means that the organization is a body which takes on the responsibility of "benefiting the community, as well as the larger communities of which it is a part" (Lutz 2009:318).

Acknowledging the importance of interdependence among members of a community and valuing one's identity through our relationship with others does not mean that we ignore the importance of the individual and its independent identity (Hailey 2008:7). Also, it does not mean that the individual is asked to sacrifice his or her own good to support the community. Rather, it functions on the understanding that, as Lutz (2009:314) argues, living in a community "the individual does not pursue this common good instead of his or her good, but rather pursues his or her good through pursuing the

common good". It is the community from which individuality emerges, instead of considering the community to be the sum of individuals, i.e., a group of "self-interested persons, each with private sets of preferences", who come together because they realize that together they can accomplish things better than on their own (Battle 2000:178f.). So Ubuntu acknowledges the role the community plays in one's life and is linked to the understanding that self-realization can only be achieved through interpersonal relationships (Lutz 2009:316). This spirit of solidarity not only increases cohesion among community members, but also the development of a collective mindset (Sigger et al. 2010:13).

By relying on each other, combining available resources and strengths and sharing what is available, people manage to survive. This brotherly caring and togetherness are perceived as strong values linked to the general importance of survival (Sigger et al. 2010:12). The value should also be seen in the light of the sometimes drastic weather conditions, geographic disparities and poverty that prevail on the African continent (Poovan 2005:22). In addition, the challenging socio-economic circumstances in South Africa in the 1990s fostered the understanding that sharing is a precondition to making things work which supported the communication of a collectivistic spirit. In a business or management context, this value can be translated as working together and relying on each other in order to be effective and may be expressed by showing concern for the needs and interests of others in the company or organization (cf. Brubaker 2013:102).

The value compassion refers to understanding others, their problems and dilemmas and the readiness to assist and thus reach out to them (Poovan 2005:24). According to Poovan (2005:24), this is a strong notion among Africans as they, from a young age, learn that sharing and giving is the only way one can receive. Compassion

also relates to the quality of understanding others and sympathizing with their concerns. It involves a deep caring, and it is through compassion that a shared vision can be created (Sigger et al. 2010:13). Sigger et al. (2010:14) stress that compassion requires communication and the ability and willingness to listen. They use the image of people sitting under a tree talking, where everybody is allowed to air their view until people have reached a consensus. Communication in such a context is more than the exchange of information, but a dialogue.

Respect and dignity are values, which are closely related. For this reason, Sigger et al. (2010:15), as well as Poovan (2005:25), group them together. In Mbigi's (1997:111) five fingers theory they are deemed to be central value dimensions and Poovan (2005:26) de-scribes them as "the most central values of the Ubuntu world-view" as they specify the social position of a person within a society and organization and therefore also define the hierarchical relationships among them. Respect can be described as being considerate and regardful to the feelings, values and rights of others whereas dignity focuses on valuing the worth of others. As such, both values are rooted in the connectedness of people with others. In a business context this would mean management being committed to develop and support their employees, while respecting age as well as experience, and being generally helpful towards each other (Brubaker, 2013:120).

The values solidarity, compassion, survival, dignity and respect form the basis of Ubuntu world view as outlined by Mbigi (1997). These are values considered to be anchored and rooted in people's lives and communities (Poovan et al. 2006: 18f.). This, however, does not mean that these values and the interpretations of how they should be lived are mandatory, and indeed different authors associate disparate values with Ubuntu. Mokgoro (1998:17) and Van den Heuvel (2008a:85), for

example, mention social values such as group solidarity, conformity, humaneness, optimism, equity and liberation in association with 'African Management' or Ubuntu. Therefore, as Karsten and Illa (2005:613) rightly emphasize, African communities are social entities which are changing, just like any other community meaning that the way in which the values are lived and translated into social action is continuously contested and negotiated. Equally, the same principle holds for companies and other entities. It is through dialogue and conversation among the members of the collective that the practices associated with Ubuntu are defined, implemented and routinized.

Thus, Ubuntu, based on the values mentioned by Mbigi (1997) and outlined by Poovan et al. (2006), can serve as an orientation. Ubuntu as a management concept needs to be seen in the context of a discourse, which started in the transition phase from apartheid to democracy and has advanced and undergone considerable changes since then. It should therefore be seen from a process perspective. Generally speaking, how a concept and the values accredited to it will eventually be put into practice in culturally diverse working environments, depends very much on contextual factors and on interfaces a company has with its environment (Van den Heuvel 2008a:16f.). This is also why Van den Heuvel (2008:17) considers it to be difficult to say precisely what Ubuntu and 'African Management' are and mean in practice. He does not perceive 'African Management' to be a clear cut concept nor as a „description of universal daily management practices” but as a „management vision with a story to be told”. Although a variety of interpretations of Ubuntu exist, there is one fundamental notion which cuts across different writings, and that is the notion of humanness linked to a strong emphasis on consultation, consensus building and participatory decision making (Van den Heuvel 2008a:161).

Despite this somewhat ambiguous conception of Ubuntu, the question is nonetheless how the fundamentals of Ubuntu can be incorporated or translated into management practices and manifest themselves in the workplace thus enhancing productivity, improving decision making, conflict solving and group dynamics among others.

#### **4. Ubuntu and management practices**

As a guiding philosophy and a source for supporting effectiveness and productivity, Ubuntu has attracted attention within South Africa as well as internationally (see Mbigi 1995; Karsten / Illa 2005; Poovan 2006). The best-known company which adopted the philosophy of Ubuntu is probably the open software platform which also carries the name 'Ubuntu'. Its code of conduct translates this as “showing humanity to one another” and of “being human” (Ubuntu Community 2019). Other companies mentioned in the literature, which have adopted the principles of Ubuntu are Durban Metrorail, South African Airways, CS Holding, an IT company (Karsten / Illa 2005:615) as well as Eskom Holdings Limited, which is present in more than 30 countries and produces 50% of the total energy used in Africa (Van den Heuvel 2008a:11). However, there is insufficient scientific evidence of how best to transfer the concept of Ubuntu into sound business practices.

Given its communitarian nature and focus on interdependence and harmonious human relationships, Ubuntu as a philosophical approach has, first and foremost, the potential to shape the habitus of managers and thus their performative attitude when interacting with others (Karsten / Illa 2005:616). In other words, Ubuntu can influence the disposition and therefore the general outlook through which managers approach their tasks and communicate with others, thus creating new business practices. Managers applying Ubuntu would focus on understanding their



company as a collective and acknowledge the interdependency of all actors involved in the achievement of the company's goals. Such an interdependence not only exists in social life but also in economic contexts. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017) stress this by saying that companies are "radically interdependent and constituted by a network of relationships which includes employees, customers, suppliers, regulators and communities". A starting point for applying Ubuntu in a management context would thus be understanding a company not as a mere collection of individuals, but as a collective, which is linked to a variety of other communities through a network of relations (cf. Lutz 2009:318).

If a company understands itself as an organization with the goal of benefiting its members as well as the larger communities that the company is part of, it would not strive for the greatest amount of profit at all costs but work towards the benefit of all (Lutz 2009:318). Ntibatiriwa (2009:307) strengthens this point by arguing that significant development and synergies can only take place when the various forces interact and cooperate and Ubuntu is the framework within which this can happen. Taking a holistic view allows the creation of reciprocal bonds between all its members, whereby subject and object become blurred. At the same time, it instills a sense and spirit of corporate identity and solidarity among them (cf. Hailey 2008:7).

A strong relationship-oriented perspective necessitates moving away from an owner-value-maximization approach (Lutz, 2009:318). In other words, the philosophy of Ubuntu can guide a company to determine its responsibilities towards all parties and collectives with which it engages, thereby taking a holistic view towards its business. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017) take this thought a step further by arguing that companies should shift their focal points from stakes towards harmonious relationships. In doing so, they

can introduce a new lens through which a company views its relations with others. This is not to say that companies do not have stakes, but that Ubuntu provides an alternative in the sense that it is based on the companies' moral responsibilities towards different parties. Under such a framework, companies do not aim to create value only for the owners of the company or shareholders but for the various communities related to the company, whereby the critical responsibility of management is to "balance the legitimate expectations of these parties". If the company considers itself to be a collective and is concerned about the well-being of all its members, this does not mean that a company is purely a social entity which has no intention of producing profit, but it is also „not merely to make money for the owners of the firm (the shareholders). Instead, the firm creates value for a range of parties related to the firm, and the key responsibility of the management is to balance the legitimate expectations of these parties" (Woermann / Engelbrecht 2017).

By following an ethical approach to business, which focuses on a nexus of relationships rather than a nexus of contracts, companies would have the moral responsibility to maintain and nourish these relationships by showing respect, consideration, kindness and by being sensitive to the needs of others, which are values at the heart of Ubuntu (Woermann / Engelbrecht 2017).

A communitarian approach requires meeting people with mutual respect and empathy, which as Mangaliso (2001:25) points out, is likely to enhance intrinsic motivation and encourage people to contribute more than they would otherwise. In practice, this means emphasizing informal and conversational communication rather than following strict formal procedures. Moreover, while traditional management training focuses on the efficiency of information transfer and thus the meaning of the message, in the context of Ubuntu, the social aspect of communication and the

communication channels are important (Mangaliso 2001:26). Support for participative interaction between the various actors, whether it be between management and staff or between staff members enhances the transfer of ideas and information as well as improving coordination (Hailey 2008:16).

A communitarian approach to management also entails taking into account the expectations and needs of employees since they are considered to be part of the nexus of relationships in which the company is engaged. Mangaliso (2001:28f.) argues that the goal of a company that follows Ubuntu principles is therefore efficiency optimisation in the long term rather than maximizing efficiency in the short term. One of the main reasons for this is that the costs of fractured relationships and social disruptions is considerable. He asserts that

“Incorporating Ubuntu principles in management is potentially a superior approach to managing organisations. Organisations infused with humanness, a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness will enjoy a sustainable advantage.” (Mangaliso 2001:32)

This is also why Molose et al. (2018:198) are convinced that companies that are run according to the principles of Ubuntu are well prepared to promote synergy and thus create a whole, which is larger than the sum of its parts.

Meretz (n.d.) argues that cooperation and competition do not have to be opposites. Rather, companies need to organize collaboration within their companies. Very often they also cooperate with others outside of their company in order to be more powerful on the market. Cooperation is thus the pre-condition in order to be competitive. People collaborate for a common good, and this is simultaneously both a means and an end. Cooperation produces social structures and practices as well as a result. Working for the common good without ignoring economic

efficiency is the kind of thinking that can also be found in computer science, for example. As previously mentioned, Mark Shuttleworth has developed a software which is available free of charge, ready to be shared, used and adapted and financed through a portfolio of services. To illustrate this thinking, the well-known Linux open source software carries the name Ubuntu (Mugumbate / Nyanguru 2013:87f.). Focusing on the relational side of business entails not striving for the highest profit possible since this necessarily requires the exploitation of human beings. It is the understanding that efficiency and competitiveness are achieved by emphasizing social well-being and embracing social responsibilities rather than technical rationality (Khomba 2011:141).

According to Brooderyk (2006:4), the ideal person has eight virtues according to Ubuntu: kindness, generosity, living in harmony with others, friendliness, modesty, helpfulness, humility and happiness. A person or a team espousing these virtues would have a competitive advantage for several reasons. One is that these virtues support the development of an excellent working atmosphere. This, in turn, is a precondition for creativity and innovation, which can't happen in a vacuum or an environment where there is animosity within the team and where people are reluctant to express their views due to the team's likely adverse reactions. A positive working environment is also important in contexts in which companies need not only to come to terms with diversity but also aim to use its potential as a competitive advantage and a source of innovation.

Apart from considering Ubuntu from a general management perspective, three interlinked areas require particular attention: the issue of decision-making, conflict management and leadership. The eight virtues of the Ubuntu worldview outlined above highlight the importance of involving all stakeholders in decision making. They are essential

ingredients in avoiding conflict and dealing with disputes, if and when they arise. Where these virtues of Ubuntu are present, it is likely that disputes will be dealt with a minimum of friction.

A further reason why Mangaliso and Van de Bunt (2007) consider the relational approach to management to be a competitive advantage is the better decision-making that strong relationships allow for. People who know each other well have a better understanding of varying viewpoints and subtle or unspoken messages. However, what may play an even more significant role is that Ubuntu strictly focuses on reaching a consensus in decision-making as opposed to decision-making based on demand and control (Mangaliso / Van de Bunt 2007). Instead of a linear approach to decision making which follows the pattern of one decision setting a precedent for the next one, Mangaliso and Van de Bunt (2007) describe decision making in the context of Ubuntu as a process that allows for flexibility towards the issues that emerge in each case and ensures that all voices are heard and considered. As a business practice, this requires involving as many people as possible in the decision-making process, thereby looking at an issue from different angles. Although this may be a time-consuming exercise, decisions reached by debate, dialogue and consideration of different opinions are likely to improve their effectiveness. Moreover, being inclusive in decision-making also strengthens relationships and the acceptance of the decisions made (Mangaliso / Van de Bunt 2007). This equally applies when making strategic decisions, and in this case, employees would be expected to proactively shape the strategy to be pursued instead of simply adhering to one's role of implementing company strategy (Woermann / Engelbrecht 2017).

Although there is agreement that following the values of Ubuntu requires consensus seeking, there are different opinions as to what this means. Woermann and Engelbrecht (2017)

agree with Khoza in maintaining that the idea of consensus does not require complete agreement. They emphasize that the process of involving all views and ensuring that minority thinking is taken into consideration as much as possible. From their perspective, group discussions and forums are excellent opportunities to contribute, pose questions and be involved in decision making. However, Barbara Nussbaum (2003:22f.) describes the process of consensus-seeking by emphasizing that a leader or chief needs to be a good listener and is required not only to play a low-key role but to try to listen to all viewpoints, supporting and facilitating a debate and finally summarizing the points mentioned before making a decision reflecting the group consensus. She recalls an incident in which she disagreed with her colleague Mantanga. After a lengthy discussion she wanted to bring the issue to a close and recalls the following conversation: „Matanga, can't we agree to disagree?“ and received the answer „No, Sisi (sister) Barbs. We have to sit and talk until we agree.“

This anecdote not only highlights the value of cooperation and reconciliation emphasized by Nussbaum, but also the idea that consensus is based on a shared understanding (Nussbaum 2003:22f.) and thus consent as well as a generally accepted opinion and decision among the members of the collective. In other words, it must be ensured that everyone is on board when implementing change and only in this way can the delivery of the agreed changes be ensured.

It is generally accepted that building consensus in decision-making processes also ensures smooth implementation of the decisions made. This is also why the time required for protracted consultations, mass gatherings, extensive consultations and debates with all stakeholders can be considered to be well invested and justified (Van den Heuvel 2008a:164). As a participatory approach to decision making supports trust and mutual respect, it is also argued that in case an urgent and

immediate decision needs to be taken, people know what needs to be done, and a participatory approach thus does not necessarily mean that quick decision making is not possible; nor does it signify that there can be no firmness in taking decisions (Van den Heuvel 2008a:165).

The great quest for participatory decision making needs to be seen in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and thus linked to the strict hierarchical structures, the master-servant attitude and the system of migrant workers of the colonial and apartheid era. As Van den Heuvel (2008:42f.) maintains, creating a shared value system, developing trusting relations as well as breaking up hierarchical structures were crucial issues for debate amongst business leaders after independence. Flat management structures have recently become popular. They espouse the values embedded in Ubuntu. Flat structures coupled with leadership styles that encourage the personal development of staff are in line with what one would expect in a community or a company that espouses Ubuntu.

Karsten & Illa (2005:613) stress the point that including and listening to the various voices in an organization prepares the groundwork for reaching and building consensus. The inspiration for how this might be realized can be drawn from African communities who practice storytelling, inclusive decision making and participatory community meetings. These cannot be claimed to be entirely new practices or only be found in an African context. However, as Iwowo (2015:423) stresses, storytelling is particularly pronounced in many African communities and tales which were told by moonlight are part of a memory with a rich and robust impact on many people. Mbigi (1997:23) describes meetings of entire villages and mass rallies, which helped to seek consensus rather than a majority vote. He stresses that these processes guided decision-makers and were important in order to accommodate cultural diversity

and to ensure that minority views were incorporated. It is important to keep in mind that such meetings were aimed at developing consensus in the light of what Karsten / Illa (2005:613) refer to as the “unity of purpose”. People unite in their effort to achieve a common objective and therefore cannot isolate themselves from each other and their concerns for each other.

Leaders and leadership styles play a significant role in implementing decision making and dealing with conflicts based on consensus. Hence the virtues related to Ubuntu are vital in order to achieve this. If managers fail to provide their employees with the physical and emotional support needed, employees will be unlikely to perform to the best of their abilities. Apart from consensus building, leadership in the context of Ubuntu entails good team spirit, meaningful participation of all stakeholders, anticipation of conflicts and their immediate resolution if and when they arise. Leadership in this sense is shared as opposed to being hierarchical or autocratic.

Consensus building is not natural if the culture in the organization and the leadership in situ is not conducive to this. Issuing instructions does not necessarily lead to buy-in from team members. A leader who lives the values outlined above is expected to reflect these qualities and thus assume a high level of social responsibility. In pre-colonial African societies, leaders were often linked to the institution of councils whose members were expected to possess wisdom and be “filled with” Ubuntu in order to be able to regulate daily issues within the community (Meylahn / Musiyambiri 2017:1). Mbigi (1997:27) refers to them as a council of elders, who were an inner circle of trusted advisors to the chief or king. Mbigi also stresses that the chiefs or kings ruled democratically through consensus and consultation. The Shona states “Ishe vanhu”, meaning that there cannot be a king without community support and this strengthens the noti-

on that African governance, guided by Ubuntu, was democratic and inclusive (Meylahn / Musiyambiri 2017:2). This also means that a community orientation is required in order to ensure that the needs of the others are met first.

This understanding is related to the idea of servant leadership (Meylahn / Musiyambiri 2017:2). Service here is not to a master, but to the community. Terms used in this context are “walking in front” and “paving the way”, as Khoza maintains (cf. Van den Heuvel 2008a:137). Winston and Ryan (2008:217) see a strong correlation between Ubuntu and the concept of servant leadership. They do so by referring to the definition of servant leadership concept as developed by Patterson (2003) who refers to it as leadership focusing on the well-being of the employees and considering the interest of the organization as well as aiming to create a community of followers. This is particularly interesting because servant leadership models have primarily been developed in the U.S. American context and could therefore be perceived as a rather Western approach (Brubaker 2013:114). Qualitative studies relating to servant leadership, however, suggest that it is a leadership approach which is globally endorsed.

Despite the fact that local cultures influence how leadership is conceptualized (Brubaker 2013:115), Winston and Ryan (2008:216) use the findings of the GLOBE study to support the argument that the servant leadership concept and its humane orientation is more global in nature than specific to Western countries (Winston / Ryan 2008:219f.) This does not mean that we should not also focus on how employees in a specific environment perceive effective leadership and its corresponding values.

Servant leadership can be seen as an extension of the transformational leadership theory as it is focused on the extent to which a leader displays social responsibility towards employees and places their needs center stage. This makes the

leader a ‘caretaker’ rather than a person whose primary role is to lead in terms of guiding or deciding which path to follow. It involves being pragmatic about achieving organizational effectiveness and financial success (Brubaker 2013:116). The role of the leader is hence to empower people, pay attention to their concerns, empathize with them and nurture them. This also means that a servant leader does not perceive him or herself as being in any way superior. Typical leadership qualities include for example listening, building community, practicing empathy, and being committed to the development of people (Mutia / Muthamia, 2016:131f.).

However, Brubaker cautions against perceiving such a close link between the servant leadership style and the core values of Ubuntu. According to him, the difference in focus is that the servant leadership is first and foremost related to a leader’s predisposition towards putting employee’s needs, interest and development, i.e. their welfare first. Ubuntu, in contrast, prioritizes the importance of community, solidarity and shared humanness, which also means that leaders “affirm dignity, humanity and mutuality of all within the shared community” (Brubaker 2013: 123). This highlights the fact that there is still a need for discussion on the precise nature of leadership linked to the core values of Ubuntu.

Generally speaking, Brubaker (2013:116) rightly suggests that the research on Ubuntu has its critics. One critique is that there has been very little research performed outside of Southern Africa. Additionally, the studies that have asked to what extent Ubuntu can be effectively integrated into managerial practices have been predominantly qualitative. This calls into question the representative validity of these studies (see also Sigger et al. 2010:8). Culture is obviously not static, which means that there is not a one-way causal relationship between culture and behavior (Mangaliso 2001:31). Mangaliso (2001:13) also cautions

against the assumption that culture is homogenous and refers to other cultural memberships such as age, rural or urban culture and contact with other cultural practices. However, this should not limit the discussions in relation to the potential that Ubuntu as a philosophy offers in cross-cultural management and its rightful place in management textbooks.

## 5. Conclusion

Ubuntu embodies the values of collaboration and cooperation and is a community-based philosophy which espouses an ethos of care, respect and solidarity. It highlights the importance of interdependence and working together in pursuit of a shared goal. Ubuntu, if recognized, valued and consciously incorporated into the culture of organizations has the potential to influence business results positively, especially in an intercultural environment.

Ubuntu helps to affirm values such as humanness, dignity, empathy, trust and respect. These values form a foundation upon which companies can create added value in their international (and especially intercultural) management practices by developing common meaning. This is because successful intercultural management is dependent not only on managing diversity but on harnessing diversity advantage for the good of the company.

The values related to Ubuntu are not unfamiliar in Western or Eastern thinking. This means that Ubuntu thinking is not entirely new nor an entirely Sub-Saharan African approach. However, developed in a context of post-apartheid, persistent economic inequality as well as challenges of reconciliation and ideas of revitalizing the wisdom of pre-colonial Africa, it offers a pronounced re-interpretation of what is genuinely perceived as African and spells out these values more profoundly while raising awareness of their relevance in today's socio-economic environment. Moreover, as Ubuntu relates to relationships and bonding with others, it corresponds

with the understanding of the self through others and therefore its goal is to recognize the humanness in oneself and in others. This can be seen as a universal value.

As a communitarian philosophy which supports the importance of interpersonal relationships, Ubuntu has a clear relevance in the business field. This is even more so at a time when multinational companies need to develop strategies which reflect the values of the societies in which they are embedded as well as a sense of global corporate social responsibility. However, it is clear that more rigorous academic research is required from within and outside Africa with regard to how the values of Ubuntu might best be implemented in a cross-cultural environment. In the light of this, this paper should be understood as an invitation to reflect upon the principles of Ubuntu and further an ongoing debate, which might suggest viable ways to close the gap between its values and the lived experience of people in organizations.

Some of the virtues of the Ubuntu worldview are universal and have applications in post-conflict societies and diverse societies where organizations can benefit from harnessing the skills of their employees and work better with all stakeholders. Understanding the dynamics of diverse communities and operating across boundaries requires the management to look beyond the existing rules of engagement and embrace ideas from different cultures. After all culture is dynamic. Embracing change in all its manifestations is critical in management in a changing environment. Globalization calls on all actors to be open-minded and Ubuntu can help to add value to established management theories.

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