



Linda's Lessons on Leadership Lesson #2 - Ubuntu

An important challenge facing leadership today is managing a diverse organizational culture. One of the ways this can happen successfully is when leadership sets a powerful example by committing to acknowledging, recognizing and valuing others. The concept of ubuntu embraces the spirit of what a genuinely diverse organization can and should become. Leadership is really about the interdependence between the leader and the led. Working in the spirit of ubuntu, leaders make the conscience choice to *flex the rules* of corporate engagement for the benefit of everyone...no one is left out.

Ubuntu and Leadership

The word ubuntu is derived from the Zulu word *umuntu*, which literally means a person or human being. Ubuntu is loosely translated to mean humanness in English. According to Krause, ubuntu means "group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, and collective unity" (2002). In the context of ubuntu, Zulus use the word *sawubona* to indicate or recognize the humanness in others. Ubuntu, however, has a more inherent meaning in the African language. Dr. Mangaliso, President, Eastern Academy of Management states that ubuntu means to be respectful, generous and giving. Put another way, ubuntu means I see you (recognize you) and I am because you are.

The spirit of ubuntu offers the organization a sense of community and belonging. When "community" is present, leaders are less likely to exclude anyone. They believe in and are inclusive in their approach to others. Leaders should know that they are not separate and apart from those they lead. Humanity integrates leaders with those that follow them. A leader's effectiveness is to a great degree directly tied to those they interact with and influence. Dr. Desmond Tutu understands ubuntu to mean "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share" (Milloy, 2001).

Once leaders recognize this interdependence and can find the internal resolve to embrace the concept, attitudes will change from the inside out. Their example set will chart the course and the organizational compass towards a more caring, responsive and supportive work environment.

Dr. Mangaliso also believes that "ubuntu can guide in the development of managerial/leadership practices for healthy competitive advantage" (2001). How can this happen? Ubuntu provides the foundation for cooperation and thus encourages a healthy competition by charging everyone to be his or



her individual best. When the spirit of ubuntu is understood, accepted and applied, the rewards to the organization can be extraordinary.

Once the lessons of ubuntu have been woven into the very fabric of the organization's culture, negative issues around differences will be minimized. Organizations will meet their competitive challenges. They will meet global marketing strategies. They can meet and exceed revenue expectations and maximize bottom line profits...all because the organization has learned how to take advantage of each and every employee's talents. It is in the spirit of recognition and awareness of collective responsibility to each other that will bring about this type of sustaining change.

Summary

Ubuntu...sounds too idealistic? Maybe for some. However, if leadership is looking to get the maximum creativity, innovativeness and productivity from its employees as well as retain the best and the brightest, then bringing the spirit of ubuntu into their organization ensures that leadership will reach out in acknowledgement and humanity to all employees. The wisdom of an ubuntu inspired leader demands inclusiveness, compassion, and an atmosphere of belonging for every individual. Knowing what it takes to lead is one thing...doing it well is another.

Ubuntu to you...I see you. I acknowledge you. I recognize you and I am so glad that you are here. Ubuntu...valuing everyone so they can be their very best.

References

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