

Blended leadership style key to succeeding in African, emerging markets - study

A [new study](#) by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) Business School has found that despite their significant differences, Western and African business leadership styles can be blended to form an entirely new construct.



Professor Paul Poisat

The study examined the leadership approaches of senior leaders and executives operating in multinational corporations in four Sub-Saharan African countries, and has now been developed into a leadership framework for businesses that are keen to succeed in African and emerging markets.

This hybrid approach, which combines Western pragmatism and African humanism, recognises the importance of fact, logic and the nature of reality, but also promotes the recognition of human-focused and collectivist forms of leadership.

While African leadership approaches have often been criticised for being poorly adaptive to increasingly complex globalised economies, empirical data in this study presents an entirely different picture – one of confident, self-assured African leaders effectively heading businesses that are part of Western multinational corporations operating in emerging markets.

“The findings of this research point to the fact that senior executives and leaders have moved towards a more humanistic culture without compromising their drive for results,” Paul Poisat, Professor and researcher at the NMMU Business School said.

Crossvergence

Commenting on the leadership approaches of the senior executives and leaders, Professor Poisat described the new leadership style as a crossvergence of Western and African culture and as the African way of Western leadership practices.

Crossvergence refers to an individual's ability to merge national culture with economic ideology in a way that allows for the creation of a unique value system that is based on harmonious interactions between the two, he explained.

"It requires the adoption of certain African leadership characteristics which are used together with Western leadership approaches. The Western approach informs the 'what' needs to be done while the African approach informs the 'how' to do it," Poisat said.

Using the experiences of senior executives and leaders, the study presents a leadership framework that promotes a hybrid approach to leadership, and highlights some of the core competencies and leadership styles that are needed to facilitate effective and successful leadership in complex emerging market environments.

"What is important about the business leadership framework is that it provides a guide to businesses which are either operating in emerging markets or are thinking about going into emerging markets, regarding the selection and or development of their senior executives," Poisat said.

Framework highlights

This Framework for Leading in Africa/Emerging Markets highlights several elements that businesses need to consider when recruiting candidates for leadership positions.

"Firstly, it looks at the context. This includes the risks and challenges related to the business environment that need to be considered. For example, political and economic risk, weak currencies, bureaucracy, culture and language limitations, and performance, resource and infrastructure issues.

"The leadership profile and style also have a key role to play. Operating in the African or emerging market context requires certain biographical details, experience and cultural exposure as well as leadership style. The five leadership styles found to be particularly effective in this context included charismatic, community centred, entrepreneurial, servant leader, and transformational styles.

"Skill sets or core competencies emerged as important factors to consider when selecting or developing leaders in these environments. In particular, competencies related to communication, commercial acumen, decision making, development, and strategic thinking, among others, were highlighted as important.

In addition to this, the framework looks at how candidates' attachments to Western market culture, African clan culture, and Western and African traits and characteristics can be combined to create the crossvergence approach to leadership that African markets increasingly require.

"The framework will benefit both employers and employees alike as it not only provides a profile for recruitment but also a competence model for skills development," Poisat said.

This leadership framework is set to assist organisations who are looking to extend their reach into African and other emerging economies as well as broaden the scope of their influence in these oftentimes challenging markets.