Leadership – what can the West learn from Africa?

In line with conference theme of relevance and rigour, and an invitation to question the ‘presumed universality of certain kinds of leadership practices’, this paper examines the current discourse around the conceptualisation of leadership (Kellerman 2012). In particular, it focuses on the origins of the leadership phenomenon (Grint 2011) and the current hegemony enjoyed by US academia on management and leadership theorizing. The paper focuses on transformational leadership (MacGregor Burns 1978, 2003) because, as Diaz-Saenz has commented:

> For the past thirty years transformational leadership has been the single most studied and debated idea within the field of leadership studies. (Diaz-Saenz 2011:299).

The research basis on which transformational leadership has been operationalised (Bass 1985) is critically examined, in particular the white-male profile of research subjects (Alimo-Metcalfe 2007). The concept of US academia providing, in effect, commercial products such as transformational leadership, into a consumer market, is also examined. Finally, the use to which western leadership and governance norms have been deployed as soft power, or post colonialism, in global politics is also explored. Key to this is what Call (2010:303-304) has described as neo conservative and neoliberal interventions into ‘failed’, failing, or fragile states’. Countries such as the US and the UK have demanded the strengthening of the capabilities of such states, through Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, using western models of governance, including leadership.

Drawing both from the field of African leadership research, and the author’s experience of working in sub Saharan Africa, the paper then examines African conceptualisations of leadership – in particular ubuntu. Ubuntu is defined by Tambulasi and Kayuni (2005:148) as ‘umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu abanye – a Zulu proverb meaning a person is a person through other persons’. Desmond Tutu characterises a person with ubuntu as:

> one who is open and available to others affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated, when others are tortured or treated as if they were less than who they are

Tutu (1999 34-3)

The work of Blunt and Jones (1997) is also important in examining the ontological position of African leaders and followers. Wealth is first extended family and clan wealth, and second ethnic or tribal wealth. A natural responsibility of leadership is the distribution of scant resources to clan and ethnic affiliates. Hotep (2010) describes the African centred leader-follower dyadic as one where both parties are of equal standing.
Discussing the comparison of transformational leadership and ubuntu, the paper concludes that the claims of transformational leadership to be universally applicable are highly contestable (Jackson 2011), and that, ironically, the humanist and reciprocal nature of ubuntu may have much to offer the developed world.

References


Tambulasi, R., Kayuni, H., Can African Feet Divorce Western Shoes? The case of Ubuntu and Democratic Good governance in Malawai *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (14 (2) 147-161