

3rd International Conference on Responsible Leadership

Responsible leadership in the 21st century: an unconventional perspective

The world arguably needs a new approach towards responsible leadership. Could it be that part of the answer lies into also tapping into unconventional and ancient wisdom, such as that of the shamans?

'We don't have a plan B because we don't have a planet B.'

These were the rather chilling words uttered by Kumi Naidoo, International Executive Director of Greenpeace and a South African human rights activist, at the 3rd International Conference on Responsible Leadership, held at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) in November 2014.

The link between this powerful statement and the responsible leadership we require to protect and sustain our planet is very clear. And it is not just the domain and responsibility of world leaders and leaders of big corporations, spiritual institutions, education facilities and community-based organisations. It also means that I, you and all of us should feel compelled to bring our A-game to contribute to leading our planet safely into the future.

But we seem to be failing spectacularly in this duty. Looking just at the UN Global Impact – Accenture *CEO Study on Sustainability* (2013) which conducted more than 100 in-depth interviews with global business leaders and furthermore did an online survey with 1 000 CEOs worldwide, in 103 countries and covering 27 industries, some startling facts emerge:

only 32% of CEOs feel that the global economy is on track to address the demands of a growing global population within environmental and resource constraints;

67% of these top executives believe that business is under-performing in dealing with global sustainability challenges; and

only 38% believe they can accurately quantify the impact their businesses are having in terms of social, environmental and financial aspects.

This dismal performance puts the focus, indisputably, on the issue of responsible leadership in the 21st century. And that it might be time to think outside the box.

The concept of responsible leadership

There is no ultimate definition of responsible leadership in the literature.

It is however well understood that the field of responsible leadership draws from a variety of disciplines. The concept of responsible leadership has traditionally been predicated on conventional wisdom relating to predominantly social sciences,

business, philosophy and politics and has largely ignore the value that can be added through the age-old wisdom embedded in more unconventional and practical indigenous leadership sources.

Modern cultures, which too often are rooted in science and specialisation linked to certain disciplines, seemingly have little room—or tolerance—for indigenous knowledge, for example the wisdom that can be brought by the shamans in the Amazon and the *!Kung* bushmen of the Kalahari, to name but two.

Yet, bridging across such boundaries is needed more than ever to create the holistic perspectives needed for dealing with the multifaceted systemic problems related to the social, environmental and economic challenges of our world – the so-called ‘wicked problems’.

Management/leadership gurus such as John C Maxwell (internationally renowned speaker on practical leadership issues and author of best sellers e.g., *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Developing the Leader Within You*), Ken Blanchard (developed the Situational Leadership model and believes in the natural goodness of people and their positive impact on relationships and emotions which in turn create better organisations) and Marshal Goldsmith (basing his work on the principle: we often hold on to the same actions that helped us to succeed up to a point, and those same actions often prevent us from achieving higher levels of success) are all doing sterling work on leadership approaches but do not appear to be exploring the value of indigenous wisdom in leadership approaches.

It is therefore left to a few trailblazers to explore other approaches and finding wisdom in ancient and indigenous concepts such as ‘intellectual shamans’ / change agents and in spiritual belief systems.

Leading academics, such as Professor Sandra Waddock (Galligan Chair of Strategy, Carroll School of Corporate Responsibility, and Professor of Management at the Carroll School of Management, Boston College), writes about the term ‘intellectual shamans’ (Waddock 2014), and states: ‘Intellectual shamans, like traditional shamans, take a healing approach to their work—bridging across disciplines, working to better the world in some way, connecting with others and with many ideas to create holistic approaches to the problems that surround us.’

Jones (1995), for instance, delves deeper into Christian spirituality and writes in her book: *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, about Jesus as a successful leader and executive, and not Jesus, the religious messiah. Jones advocates for leaders to use what she terms as the Omega Leadership style which incorporates both the alpha leadership style (based on masculine authoritative use of power) and the beta leadership style (based on feminine cooperative use of power). Through incorporating and enhancing both these styles into Omega mode, leaders will be able to harness spiritual energy to become empowered to lead in a responsible way. And through showing Omega Leadership, Jones believes Jesus is able to provide the direct, alpha-style leadership in conjunction with an understanding of feelings and emotions of individuals in the beta-style.

Jones furthermore explores ancient wisdom and, through analysing a number of attributes such as self-mastery that she believes Jesus has, how the application of this ancient wisdom can inform leaders to be visionary. She also believes that most leaders are internally motivated and intuitive, or they would not be able to hear and see things that no one else can see or hear.

Investigating the realm of indigenous wisdom, the spirit world and especially the shamans provides insight into the more unconventional wisdom available to the world.

Hancock (2005, p.344) writes that 'the assumption on which science is built is that there is no such thing as the 'supernatural', no such thing as 'spirits', and that all unexplained phenomena, no matter how mysterious they may at first appear to be, will prove on proper examination to have natural causes that are fully explicable in terms of established physical, chemical and biological laws.'

And, he argues, could it be that as inter alia the shamans in the Amazon and the *!Kung* bushmen of the Kalahari tell us with conviction, 'that their ability to enter deeply altered states of consciousness through trance dances [and other methods] really give them access to powerful non-physical entities capable of influencing events in the world?' (Hancock, 2005, p. 344).

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What can shamans possibly teach us about responsible leadership?

How can conventional wisdom be augmented by historically marginalised indigenous wisdom (with specific reference to the wisdom of shamans)?

Hancock (2005, p.210) states that, 'The word 'shaman' itself has very specific origins, being derived from the Tungus-Mongol noun *saman*, meaning, broadly speaking, 'one who knows'. It is used generally not because the Tungus mysteriously contacted and influenced other cultures but because the Tungus shamanism was the first example of the phenomenon to be studied by European travellers.'

At the heart of shamanism is the belief that the mind can experience other levels of reality and seeks to harness that capacity to explore those other realms and to channel and maximise the resultant benefits derived for the good of society as a whole. (Hancock, 2005, p.346)

And according to King (King 1990, p14), Shamans are seen as ‘healers of relationships between mind and body, between people, between people and circumstances, between humans and Nature, and between matter and spirit’.

The definition of shamans was subsequently applied in other parts of the world where systems and approaches similar to shamanism have been found.

Waddock (Waddock 2014) says shamans know how to:

‘Move through different frames or realms of experience, e.g., across worlds, communities, disciplines, sectors, institutions. Traditional shamans cross spiritual realms, often in altered (meditative, trance-induced) states;

Gather and bring back needed information;

Experience themselves, others, and the world in (spiritual and intuitive) ways that go beyond physical boundaries;

Be ‘shapeshifters’, comfortable in many realms; and

Purposefully use discovered information (wisely) to heal their patient, community, or the world.’

Waddock furthermore distilled three related, overlapping roles for these intellectual shamans (or difference makers), namely that of healers, connectors and sensemakers.

She describes the first role, **healing**, as being purpose driven (making the world a better place), the ability to see what needs healing in relationships, to think holistically and systematically as well as understanding processes and dialectical changes relating to people, ideas, theories, practices, institutions, methodologies (including investigating and reframing cultural myths).

The world is much in need of healing—and there are many people attempting to do this healing.

According to the Journal of Corporate Citizenship (<http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com>) these healers are attributed various names: they are called intellectual shamans when they are academics, wayfinders when they are strategists or leaders who find and explore new territories by reading the signs difference makers when they are social entrepreneurs and innovators, edgewalkers when they walk the interstices of functions in organizations, systems thinkers when they make connections and see interdependencies, and, more generally, change makers, who have changed themselves so that they can change the world for the better.

The second role, **connecting**, relates to the ‘ability to connect different realities (or mediating realities, boundary spanning, bridging worlds, e.g., disciplines, sectors, institutions)’. The intellectual shamans are able to connect across traditional boundaries existing in the modern world, they can observe what might be done differently or better and act on this observation, and they are risk-takers and often

seen by others as mavericks. They can, as it were, 'walk between worlds' and in the process gather and bring back information that provides, and mediates around, new insights, ideas and practices and helps create holistic balance across different spheres of experience.

The third key role is that of **making sense** of what has been seen and provide leadership around it.' Waddock describes sense-making as using 'action, vision, narrative to create new cultural myths or institutions and heal old ones.' The intellectual shamans are 'sources of wisdom and knowledge, prophets of the future, and counsellors' who draw on both theoretical and practical knowledge in their practice.' They use storytelling to make sense of the whole picture, they are future oriented and solutions focused (taking on stewardship of the future), they apply their wisdom to deal with challenges (not using 'magic' but there is an element of spiritual guidance) and they focus on making sense for the benefit of others not just for themselves.

But what does this kind of thinking mean in terms of the key characteristics of future leaders?

Key characteristics of responsible leaders for the 21st century

In combining conventional and unconventional wisdom the key characteristics of future leaders should include:

Focusing on the power of purpose: Be driven by compassionate values and the need to contribute to the healing of the world (Waddock 2014).

Having the strength of self-mastery (Jones 1995): Maintain a connection with your own inner knowledge while also being open to take on board other's knowledge (both conventional and indigenous). And, with great personal resolve, be willing to do the difficult thing and to stand alone in your beliefs to follow what your heart, gut, spirit, or instinct is telling you.

Being able to think holistically, ethically, systemically, creatively and forward looking for the betterment of the world and all it holds (Waddock 2014): Think and integrate and generate wisdom in a way that is cross disciplinary, cross institutional and across the boundaries of sectors and types of wisdom. Be open to paradox and ambiguity and to risk taking.

Becoming a change agent/ difference maker/ intellectual shaman: Be a pragmatic visionary and also understand the strength of taking action (Jones 1995). Sometimes be willing to take action first – based on taking a risk and imagining what will make things better – and then in hindsight recognise the vision behind the action and its values based underpinnings. Be a maverick. (Waddock 2014).

Connecting with key thought leaders and decision makers (including politically savvy networkers): Focus on the strength of relationships (Jones 1995), interact with

people and institutions who cross boundaries and see things in new ways (Waddock 2014).

Making sense of what is happening around you and anticipate what could happen in the future: Reframe and re-envision conversations and find meaning in these to add to the store of wisdom as well as tap into what Hancock describes as adaptive advantage – that wisdom which had offered some distinct and profound advantages to our ancestors and could, conceivably, continue to do so today (Hancock 2005, p.344).

Into the future

To inform responsible leadership approaches for the 21st century both streams of wisdom (conventional and unconventional) need to be acknowledged and integrated to create the necessary transitions to a sustainable global economy.

As Damian Ruth (2014) stated at the 3rd International Conference on Responsible Leadership: ‘Our task ... is to see what insights may be drawn from a broader tapestry of indigenous wisdom.’ And, together with that, ‘developing a coherent global world view based on shared values. This is first and foremost an act of re-imagination.’

There is a concerted focus on responsible leadership across the world.

Various initiatives are under way and most of the large tertiary institutions have centres specialising in this field.

And academics are pulling their weight in researching the inclusion of indigenous wisdom, especially the practical ways in which this kind of wisdom can be applied in the modern world. For a planned March 2016-edition of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* (<http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com>) there is already a call for papers on the topic: *Intellectual Shamans, Wayfinders, Systems Thinkers and Social Movements: Building a Future Where All Can Thrive*. And Waddock is also publishing a new book in January 2015: *Intellectual shamans: Management academics making a difference* (Cambridge University Press, UK).

This movement around responsible leadership is furthermore being promoted by an association of the world’s leading business schools and companies under the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative – GRLI (<http://www.grli.org>), whose aim is towards ‘creating individual and collective leadership and practice that is globally responsible - that strives to be the best FOR the world rather than the best IN the world.’ The GRLI, together with the Association of MBAs and the UN Global Compact (asking companies to embrace, support and enact, within their sphere of influence, a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labour standards, the environment, and anti-corruption), among others, are forerunners in innovative thinking on responsible leadership.

Incisive work is also carried out under the umbrella of the 50plus20 organisation (<http://www.50plus20.org>), a collaborative initiative that seeks to learn of new ways and opportunities for management education to transform and reinvent itself.

It's clearly time for a new mindset.

Professor Derick de Jongh (Director of the Albert Luthuli Centre for Responsible Leadership, University of Pretoria, SA) says: 'It's time for a mutual re-education, a long overdue convergence in *'who we are and what we know.'*

Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize-winner and retired Archbishop, states in The Big Issue magazine (Tutu 2014/2015): 'There is a word we use in South Africa that describes human relationships: ubuntu. It says: I am because you are. My successes and failures are bound up in yours. We are made for each other, for inter-dependence. Together, we can change the world for the better.'

Unfortunately not all leaders will have the openness of mind, spiritual and emotional maturity and ethical grounding to embrace indigenous wisdom and to integrate it into the more conventional type of wisdom relating to leadership. But we ignore the contribution that such wisdom can make towards responsible leadership at our own peril.

Responsible leadership is the glue that is needed to hold our planet together. And we all need to understand fully: *there is no planet B.*

By Madi Hanekom

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