

Managing for the yet-to-come: Yesterday's and today's Ancestors

I knew they were geniuses

We probably are not from the same community, but you must have heard of my ancestor's courage in the face of an enemy (ooh yes, we are that popular!). The year was 1902, long before any of us were born. Without warning, the colonizers instituted social and economic policies which directly altered my community's way of life. My ancestors were not pleased with this, as the 'new normal' of growing cash crops threatened the very fabric our society was built on: communal living. With limited resources, my people put their trust in what they knew best, traditional, and spiritual solutions.

By using the 'war medicine'—a mixture of water, castor oil and millet seeds—they believed they had the power to defeat the new enemy and his weapons. When applied to the body, this medicine was believed to transform German bullets into water. The use of the war medicine brought my ancestors together, showing how a shared form of knowledge gave them courage when fighting an unknown enemy with unknown powers. The unification was even broader, as they shared the liquid with our neighbours in the spirit of Ubuntu bringing different communities together against the common enemy. The leader of these ancestors of mine had had a revelation through a dream that East Africa was meant to save the world from colonialism. This would symbolically be called the 'Maji Maji' Rebellion—'maji' being Swahili for watery war medicine. Although this battle would eventually become increasingly lost for my people, the culture of the united rebellion prepared us for the current enemy: coronavirus.

Appreciating the geniuses, the ancestors were, I hereby seek to analyze the current global crisis through their spirit. The essay reflects how the pandemic has radically changed 'normal' ways of doing things while drawing lessons of unity in the panic—the Ubuntu spirit. I lay context on management through the Ubuntu spirit, by analyzing how a social science research institute has effectively managed within the tumultuous disruption of the crisis. I then take pride in the global citizenship status of the youths and position them as well-suited descendants ready to take up management mantles.

It's a pandemic...

After weeks of watching in shock and disbelief at the so-called 'first world' being crippled by the novel virus, our president confirmed the first case of the virus in our territory in March 2020. Trying to explain the anxiety and fear which grappled us would be the same as explaining the undocumented fear that the people outside the biblical Noah's Ark felt as the waters submerged them to death. Both the private and public sector were sent into turmoil. Managers made fast and radical decisions with little to no clear information on what could save their organizations.

As an undergraduate volunteer and a junior researcher at a renowned research institute, I thought I had done my part of familiarizing myself with the 'ways' of the virus through watching the international cable news updates almost on an hourly basis. I knew that the work the institute carries out in the Social Sciences and Humanities would be critical in documenting the daily livelihoods of people during a pandemic and was sure that this would allow us to continue working from the office as the social and productive fabric of our work.

After the presidential announcement on a Friday, the country director of the institute—who is not one to panic and whose management and leadership skills I can only term as both inborn traits and acquired through training and experience—sent us all emails detailing some precautions we should all adhere to both at work and at home during the weekend. Come Monday, we would convene for a meeting where the three institute directors positioned between Nairobi and London decided we should all work from home. Responding to reality, not society expectations, the management had assessed the situation and cancelled many of the upcoming events, despite public pleading that some—like the annual lecture hosting renowned poet and scholar Prof. Micere Mugo—take place. By doing so the management thought critically like doctors who Drucker (2008) applauded as clear thinkers.

Lessons from our past

The virus started as a simple cough—one that the world thought a junior medical student could treat—but became a public health emergency of international concern in late January, and a global pandemic in mid-March. Following the confirmation of Kenya’s ‘patient zero,’ we all went into panic mode. We had watched from afar as the virus permeated the global north like the proverbial wildfire in the desert. We all rushed to empty the supermarkets of toilet paper, sanitizers, and the few groceries we could afford. As the saying goes, ‘monkey see, monkey do.’

In the international arena, all eyes were focused on the medical researchers whose optimism fixated on the hope of finding a vaccine soon. In the meantime, our neighbours from Madagascar—borrowing a leaf from my ancestors—confidently developed a herbal concoction and, in the same Ubuntu spirit, shared their ‘Maji Maji’ medicine with us and other regions of Africa. The same doubts channeled towards my ancestors’ war medicine were repeated by international bodies advising against the consumption of the Madagascar herbal ‘war medicine.’ But with the fear accompanying this crisis, the concoction was a relief most of us were ready to believe in.

With time, vaccines were developed. Yet beyond our fantasy of global unity and solidarity, the scramble for vaccine supply by countries around the world could arguably surpass the 1884-1885 scramble for Africa. To cite Nanjala Nyabola (2021), vaccine nationalism is not only patently unjust but also dehumanizing to us in the Global South. As we continue to wait for the scrapings after the rich countries have had their fill, our ‘Maji Maji’ concoctions of lemon, ginger and honey continue to be diligently cooked up in most homes and—guided by our ancestor's precedent—we face the new world ‘colonizer’ head on in this battle.

Ticking Drucker’s boxes

Observing the institute’s management of the crisis reveals that the revolutionary thoughts by the father of modern management, Peter Drucker, is no longer a prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness. Like in most workplaces, radical changes had to be instituted for the survival of both the organization and its ongoing projects. The changes, as discussed in this section, affirm Drucker’s provision that organizations in the 21st century would only survive in a different form than we traditionally know them (The Economist, 2001).

In Drucker’s (2001) words, “to survive, organizations require an ethos of imagination, exploration, experiment and discovery”. At the institute, most of the projects and programs were adjusted and

relocated into the ‘new’ online world of Zoom. The traditionally held annual lecture and dinner gala—whose postponement had led to so much emotionally charged opposition—was held later and under a new theme “Africa and the Global Outbreak Narrative” (Batour and Burnett, 2021), with only virtual glass cheers to signify the traditional cocktails.

Organizational success in this century also depends on managers’ commitments to make positive impacts in the world (Drucker, 1986). At the institute, the mission of building quality social science researchers is now achieved in virtual spaces. A weekly PhD forum and reading group meets virtually, gathering the members to discuss their field research and analyzing key text on Africa. The positive feedback from the members in the Zoom chats and on our common WhatsApp group continues to inspire the management team as it affirms their Drucker’s (1986) traits that “leadership and management is the lifting of a man’s vision to higher sights, the raising of a man’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a man’s personality beyond its normal limitations”.

Drucker (1986) in the same breath argues that management tasks, responsibilities, and practices exist for the sake of society. In the face of social inequalities being exacerbated and becoming increasingly apparent globally during the pandemic, the institute organized workshops and panel discussions on racism in the context of Black Lives Matters activism and protests around the globe. This timely unity shows the management belief in the Ubuntu spirit that my ancestors stood by. It also shows a management led by a ‘people first’ belief that has been evident all through. This also ticks Drucker's ‘proverbial’ three dimensions of the 21st corporation: economic organization, human organization, and a social organization (The Economist, 2001).

With the staff working virtually, programs such as the Graduate Attachment Scheme, that I am currently contracted on, have also been held remotely. Management of the program has been on ‘Management by Objectives’ (MBO) formulated by Drucker (1954). With weekly check-ins we divide tasks in a democratic manner which allows us all to grow together as we achieve the goals and objectives of our different projects. In *The Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959) Drucker further argues that the most valuable asset for the 21st Century would be its knowledge workers. This has been evident in the diverse ways the Information and Communication personnel at the organization has had to step in facilitating and coordinating the countless Zoom and Skype sessions.

The above breakdown depicts how the institute responded effectively to the crisis. From the breakdown the strategies taken orient around a continuous mission of connecting the institute with its community which I argue is in the Ubuntu spirit that my ancestors and my community is built on. This affirms that management is a social function and therefore both socially accountable and culturally embedded (Drucker, 1986). The Ubuntu philosophy as analyzed in the next section not only connects people from the same community but also allows them to connect with other actors as it champions for humanness. The philosophy when well inculcated in the fabric of different organizations saves them when at what I call a ‘hard rock’- between a rock and hard place- like the current pandemic.

Relieving through humaneness and the Ubuntu spirit

The spirit of Ubuntu champions for interconnectedness, its literal meaning being, ‘in existence with and through others’ (Guma, 2013). This philosophy has been the backbone of not just my community but strands of it can be found in almost all the other over three hundred subethnic groups that use variations of Bantu languages on the African continent. For example, in the isiZulu maxim ‘Umntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu,’ translated as ‘I am because you are, and you are because we are’; or the Sesotho expression ‘Batho pele’ which means ‘people first’ (Guma, 2013).

The spirit calls for good humanness from all entities in the society including organizations. It further challenges organizations to ‘put people first’ in management, an aspect of management that has been crucial in the current pandemic that saw massive job losses amidst several other anxieties cutting all aspects of human livelihood. For an organization to put its people first, the management must have been able to connect with them to a level that has allowed them to live socially. This means the management understands the social needs of the employees and its clients at various times and in different circumstances including and more so during an international crisis.

For the yet-to-come: Youth as today’s ancestors

In a world of constant distractions by the pandemic and its daily crises, online presence has become a superpower. We, the youth, as digital natives, have fortunately immersed ourselves in this world juggling more than five social media platforms while our parents continue to struggle with sending WhatsApp voice notes. Keyboard ‘warriors’ continue to win and lose battles in this online world where activism, learning and even stupidity has found a place. As earlier quoted Drucker categorically stated “the most valuable asset for the 21st Century would be its knowledge workers” most of them being workers well versed with the online world.

For us, our ‘Maji Maji’ solution is this positioning which is paramount in the current digital and information driven world. Contextually we have much of our schoolwork encompassing information and communication courses and devices. With globalization we have become global citizens, thus increasing the number of ancestors we can claim lineage to. That is to say, we have Peter Drucker as our ancestor which makes our ‘Maji Maji’ war medicine stronger and more efficient as managers. Having said that, we refuse the narrative of ‘we are the leaders of tomorrow’ by proclaiming that tomorrow is already here with us.

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