

## **Leadership Lessons from Ants**

### **Our Leaders are bad.**

At the age of 11, I saw my father, staring at a blue screen. He was listening as a newscaster read out the names of the victims of the Sosoliso plane crash.

Alas, 101 passengers were burnt alive!

The fire trucks at the local airport had no water in them to put out a fire that engulfed the plane on the runway.

The victims were secondary school students returning home for Christmas Vacation. I lost friends in that plane crash.

I will later recall asking my mother, why an airport in a city close to water had no water in their fire trucks? Her reply, "it is because our leaders are bad".

For 5 years, my family lived under the shadow of this crash. As my brother and I took flights from our local airport in Port Harcourt to our boarding school in Lagos.

In 2009 a heavy burden melted when we completed high school and no longer had to make those trips.

### **What Makes a Good Leader?**

At an early age, I knew that I lived in a country of bad leaders. So I couldn't take simple things for granted. This awareness drove me to find stories of good leadership, everywhere.

In 2012, I fell in love with Ancient Rome. I was happy to discover that a slave walking at the back of the Emperor said the words "you are human" into his ears. While the emperor walked through the streets of Rome at his victory parade. To remind the Emperor that he was human in his hour of glory.

Learning about a way to deal with the pride of a leader in the old world was a thing of joy for me. A citizen of the developing world, full of self-important leaders.

Also, I once read an article on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The father of present-day Turkey. In the evenings, he liked drinking and making merry with friends. So he told his aides not to obey any orders he gave in those moments<sup>1</sup>. Again, a leader aware of his weakness was a new experience for me.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Mcmillan, "8 leadership lessons from history" World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, on 15 Jan 2017

### **So what exactly, makes a good leader?**

According to Drucker, a good leader produces results. I agree with him. But I also think that a good leader must give room for other people to think and say what they think out loud. Without them being afraid of getting punished for thinking the way that they do.

In Nigeria, we had gotten used to having bad leaders. I suppose, in the same way. A person who lived in a flood or tsunami-prone area got on with life.

Hence, most of our leaders have acted as Giants. This Giant leader makes everyone in the country afraid of them. So people worry about saying or thinking the wrong thing. These leaders are also happy to use force and intimidation. To threaten and shame people who do not act or think the way that they want them to. They also create their own system of alternative facts. In that world, the giant leader listens to only news that feeds his ego.

Across the world, leaders like this have become more popular. Many countries including the US, Hungary, Brazil, China, and Russia. Have put in giant leaders into power. These Giant leaders have now led to a more dangerous world for all.

A world where we blame immigrants for taking our jobs. A world where we see facts from scientists as a hoax. Where we create our own facts to agree with our biases. A time where countries use disinformation as a weapon against their rivals.

To these giant leaders, I say, "O, it is excellent. To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous. To use it like a giant."- William Shakespeare.

### **Giant Leadership in Nigeria: The loss of free-thinking**

The Late Nigerian activist singer and father of Afrobeat, Fela wrote "Zombie". A song describing the sparse thinking of Nigerian soldiers. Under army rule. He sings,

Zombie o, zombie (zombie o, zombie)  
 Zombie o, zombie (zombie o, zombie)  
 Zombie no go go, unless you tell 'em to go (zombie)  
 Zombie no go stop, unless you tell 'em to stop (zombie)  
 Zombie no go turn, unless you tell 'em to turn (zombie)  
 Zombie no go think, unless you tell 'em to think (zombie) (1-6)<sup>2</sup>

In this song, the musical scribe of Nigerian Life let out the truth. Nigerians have become Zombies who act without thinking or questioning authority.

The Zombification of Nigerians is strongest in the school setting. We learn by rote, not allowed to think for ourselves. During tests, you are to give back the exact words of the teacher to get a good grade.

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<sup>2</sup> Kuti, Fela "Zombie" Coconut Records 1976.

In my third year of High school, I had a classmate whose name was Usen. He had only become my classmate because he had to repeat the year. His year as my classmate was not a pleasant one. Usen was often at the receiving end of the teacher's cane for not taking down notes and scoring low on class tests. He was often called "an olodo", a derogatory word as it meant he was dull.

I once saw a crowd gather around Usen. He was demonstrating a car he had built from scrap paper. He had also used elastic bands, bottle caps, a discarded watch battery, and broomsticks. My jaw dropped when I saw his little car move.

It was years later I saw that my shock at Usen's work was because I saw him as one thing, an olodo. I felt shame for thinking in such a blind way.

### **Giant Leadership across the world: Unable to respond to a Crisis**

The world is in crisis. Problems are everywhere. Our sea levels are rising, terror is all around us. Now, we also have a public health crisis to deal with. This crisis has given us a chance to see Giant leaders act in a crisis. To see if they can do their jobs well.

According to Drucker "Leadership is lifting a person's vision to high sights. The raising of a person's performance to a higher standard. The building of a personality beyond its normal limitations"<sup>3</sup>.

As expected, giant leaders have been unable to meet Drucker's hope of Leadership. They have failed to raise their standard to a high level. To bring results to their people. From China to Brazil, Russia, and the US. Giant leaders have botched the most important crisis in fresh memory.

So why do giant leaders struggle so much to produce results in a moment of crisis?

Look at their leadership style. Giant leaders show a coercive leadership style. They believe by barking out orders results happen. Or by ignoring them, the crisis will go away.

### **Peter Drucker's Insight on Giant Leadership:**

**“No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings”- Peter Drucker.**

Malcolm Gladwell in his book, David and Goliath revealed. It was Goliath who was vulnerable in the clash between the two. He was a giant, and that made him slow and clumsy. He was likely to be half-blind (double vision is a common side-effect of an excess of human growth hormone)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter F. Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1974), 370

<sup>4</sup> Gladwell, M. (2013). **David and Goliath: Underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants** (First edition.). New York: Little, Brown and Company.

So the only way he could defeat David was to have his hands on him. That's why he called out to him, **"Come here"** and **I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"**<sup>5</sup>. But David did not need to be near him. David had a sling. Which gave him a hidden advantage over Goliath. The moral of this story is the strong are often weak if looked at from the right angle. Also, people who seem weak can turn out to be in fact strong.

### **The Debate-**

#### **"What a man can do, a woman can do better".**

A lot of kids like me quoted those words in primary school. My tiny little feet tucked into black ballet flats, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. As I spoke in a room full of adults "why women make better leaders than men". I recall ending my speech with the line "remember, what a man can do, a woman can do better". To a room full of clapping hands at the Christmas show.

In reality, Nigeria has never had a female leader. So my view of female leadership is not widely accepted in my country. Instead, it has one of the lowest numbers of female political participation in Africa.

As I grew older I became more interested in women and leadership. So I wanted to find out if women make better leaders than men. This search led me to a study printed by the Harvard Business Review. The study showed that women score higher than men on most leadership skills.

According to the study, women scored higher on skills involving. Taking the initiative, acting with resilience, and practicing self-development. They also scored high on skills that required driving for results. Women also excelled in displaying high integrity and honesty. While men performed better at "developing strategic perspective" and "professional expertise"<sup>6</sup>.

The actions of female leaders in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, and Taiwan during the coronavirus pandemic. Appear to back up the findings of the study that female leaders do better than male leaders in a crisis.

But we can not study difficult things in a reductive way. Hence, a rush to conclude that women make better leaders strips us of complexity. For all the countries listed above score high in the Global Gender gap report. So a better answer might be that countries that elect female leaders are more inclusive.

They already have a lot of women in positions of power and are thus more equal societies.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 17 vs 44 New International Version

<sup>6</sup> Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "Research: Women Score Higher Than Men in Most Leadership Skills" Harvard Business Review June 25, 2019

A more gender-equal condition in those countries. Produced a more vigorous response in a crisis. In such settings, the values of collaboration and resilience are primary. This is what we should learn from the female leaders' better handling of COVID 19<sup>7</sup>.

Also, the 21st-century challenges do not fit for the old-style of leadership. It needs a new type of leadership. To deal with new problems like an aging population and the rise of artificial intelligence.

Now back to the story of David and Goliath. Men scored high on 2 skills that were very valued in leaders. While the skills Women did better at were not as valued in leaders before.

Yet, the world has changed. Leadership Skills that once looked weak are now the most sought after in the 21st century.

### **What did Drucker think of female leaders?**

They asked Peter Drucker, who was the best CEO in America? Drucker's reply, Frances Hesselbein. The CEO of the American Girl Scouts.

His reply was a surprise. Everyone expected Drucker to say, Jack Welch. The lionized CEO of General Motors or the names of other top male CEOs.

He said, "She could manage any company in America, even General Motors, and do a great job"<sup>8</sup>

### **What did she achieve?**

The Girls Scouts Movement of America at a time of falling membership. Chose Frances Hesselbine as its CEO. At the end of her term, she left the scouts with its highest membership ever. She also raised the number of minority members of the scouts by three-fold.

Her advice "Alliances, partnerships and collaborations are the language of the future."

These examples of female leadership. Evoked in me ants as a symbol for leadership.

What can ants teach us about anything? I bet you are thinking. My answer, a whole lot.

### **Ant Leadership: An alternative to foster critical thinking in a crisis**

A critical time is to be on the verge of crisis, and a solution- "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!"<sup>9</sup>

Ant leadership is the opposite of Giant Leadership.

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<sup>7</sup> Louise Champoux-Paille and Anne-Marie Croteau "Why women leaders are excelling during the coronavirus pandemic" The Conversation May 13, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Edersheim Ph.D., "The Woman Drucker Said Was the Best CEO in America", Management Matters Network on 04/27/2017

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 6 vs 6 New Translation

A group of researchers studying the remarkable self-organization of ants. Described how ants act in a crisis;

### **Ants in a crisis**

"The insects escape floods in their habitat by assembling into rafts made up of up to 100,000 members. The buoyant structures, which can be as large as a dinner plate. Can float for weeks, enabling the colony to survive and find a new home<sup>10</sup>".

**Lesson 1:** They collaborate and cooperate with each other to survive a crisis.

### **How did they build a structure to survive a crisis?**

"The ants form air pockets by pushing away from whichever ants they connect with. Creating buoyant rafts that are 75% air. The weave of the ant fabric held together by many connections. Among individual ants, which orient themselves perpendicular to one another. The result is a water-repellant lattice. That enables even ants at the bottom of the structure to survive".<sup>11</sup>

**Lesson 2:** They build smart structures that are durable. Able to protect even those at the bottom.

**Ants and the reserve team:** Research shows that 40% of ants in a colony are lazy and do nothing. But, researchers discovered that inactive ants serve as a form of reserved labor. So when 20% of the most active ants were out of the colony. The inactive ants stepped up to do the work<sup>12</sup>

**Lesson 3:** Always have a talented reserve team for back up in moments of crisis.

### **Ants and Female Leadership**

Only females run an ant colony. In this female world of ants, there are no leaders. The participation of every ant's intelligence becomes the key to success. Despite this lack of leaders, ant colonies perform complex tasks. This complex set of tasks ensures the survival of the colony.

**Lesson 4:** Ants leave nothing to chance. They rely on the collective input of members to prepare for and survive a harsh winter.

### **Conclusion**

Peter Drucker in his essay "Managing oneself". Stresses the importance of placing yourself. Where your strengths can turn out a result<sup>13</sup>. For as long as I can remember, I have always been

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Singer for [Quanta magazine](#)"The remarkable self-organization of ants"

<sup>11</sup> Emily Singer for [Quanta magazine](#)"The remarkable self-organization of ants"

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Charbonneau et al. Who needs 'lazy' workers? Inactive workers act as a 'reserve' labor force replacing active workers, but inactive workers are not replaced when they are removed, *PLOS ONE* (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*

dutiful. A dutiful daughter, a dutiful sister, and a dutiful student. I studied hard, got into good schools, and became a lawyer.

But, I have always known that life in the black and white clothes, robe, and wig of a lawyer wasn't for me. So this year, I chose to say yes to the things I am good at- writing and gender advocacy.

5 months into this choice I have this to show. Chosen by UN Women as one of 25 Young female leaders in Nigeria. Also, I got into an African writing fellowship. Now, here I am writing an essay for entry into the Peter Drucker Challenge. I took Drucker's advice to zero in on my strengths and I have seen results.