



Ubuntu as the means to ethical African hospitality management sustainability

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Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to demonstrate that within African society, the philosophy of Ubuntu, which is in accord with Christian and other philosophies of morality, can be utilized by hospitality businesses to develop employees and improve business. Ubuntu is described in two celebrated metaphors or maxims "I am because we are" and "humanity towards others". Ubuntu is considered to be the very essence of all human beings. A hospitality manager with an Ubuntu approach, upholds moral values, they help others, they are not threatened by others ability, but rather strive to support and help them develop their skills. In a hotel setting, Ubuntu is demonstrated by the management and individuals supporting each other to grow and develop in their skill set towards personal and business growth and sustainability. Employees must be empowered and partake in decision-making processes, as their buy-in will make them likely to act in a positive way rather than view managerial instructions as an imposition from above. The main objective of the research is to suggest that Ubuntu in practice can greatly assist hotels and other industry players to retain their employees due to its focus on creating a value system which involves all stakeholders and by its incorporation of notions of mutual respect, integrity, inclusiveness, accountability and empowerment and above all respect for fellow human beings.

Keywords: Ubuntu, philosophy, respect, tolerance, growth, sustainability.

Introduction

South Africa possesses abundant natural resources and for the most part its infrastructure is today already in good shape with the exception of power generation which is currently under a revamp. Unemployment remains comparatively high at 29 percent, and many economic problems inherited from the apartheid epoch persist. These include poverty, skill-shortages, exploitation of workforces and a general lack of economic empowerment among disadvantaged group. In the African hospitality business environment, the behaviour of managers is under greater scrutiny than was previously the case. The access to information of the public at large makes transgressions on the part of employees virtually impossible to keep secret. Unethical business practice, clearly leads to the reputations of businesses an, becoming smeared. The customers of today, including hospitality employees expect managers to adhere to high standards of ethicality in their behaviour. Supplementary to this is the fact that there are amplified governmental regulations in place for all organizational activities to remain ethical (Wright & Noe, 1996). Behaviours, which are in line with the narcissistic value system that is prevalent in the West and are based on the ethic of self-preservation, are not conducive to effective hospitality business practice in Africa, and yet such practice is rife. Understanding problems associated with hospitality employee issues provides needed insights into why so many people tend to leave the industry, as well as into ways to reduce the many apparent problems. A service industry such as hospitality is invariably labour



intensive, and workplace problems exist. About 41 percent of South Africa's working-age population contributes in the economy, and there are merely 5.9 million registered individual taxpayers. Approximately 65 percent of the country's workers are hired in the services sector (Deloitte's, 2014). With high unemployment and growing skills shortage, the country struggles to accommodate its growing hospitality sector. This is exacerbated by what is perceived to be poor treatment in the workplace. Generally speaking, South African hospitality organisations pay poorly as do most globally. There is a constant employee turnover which results in milieus that nurture and boost workplace problems.

Hospitality employees problems faced

It is common knowledge that most hotel employees have a perception of poor social status (Wildes, 2005; Poulston, 2008). The issues that plague employees in hotels for example include inter alia under-staffing, a sense of inferiority towards guests and even subservience towards managers (Poulston, 2007), lack of needed soft and hard skills and poor training, lack of recognition for hard work and long working hours carried out in often trying conditions, no opportunities for promotion, poor quality of supervision, and poor group relations, ad hoc disciplinary processes, constructive dismissals and sexual harassment (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). Many of these issues are partly due to lack of respect shown towards employees and they result in a high employee turnover and labour instability. Simons and Hinkin (2001) found that great employee turnover negatively affects profitability. The ultimate result is an unsustainable hotel or other hospitality business. If there is an understanding by managers that employees are flesh and blood human beings worthy of and requiring respect, the such issues will most likely dissipate to the benefit of the hotel. Amos, Ristow and Pearse (2008:172), argue that employee turnover can be due to a blend of factors such as what was stated above. The hospitality industry's problem with recruitment, retention, and often under-staffing is common knowledge (Brien, 2004). The hospitality industry has a poor reputation for training (Maxwell et al., 2004), that is to a large extent based on a lack of respect for fellow employees and thus Ubuntu.

Conduct which strays from the moral imperatives governing the behaviour of individuals and businesses is deemed to be unethical and tends to destabilize the system in which a business operates. In this regard, the ethic of self-preservation (ESP), is highly destructive in the long-term. Businesses which opt for this particular approach in their dealings with employees and customers do not have a long-term vision in which their sustainability is assured. Sadly, more and more businesses are becoming more narcissistic in their cultural orientations (Irvin, 2002). What is needed is a vision which is realistic enough to be achievable and which encompasses 'imaginative insight into what is to be done so that the result will lead the organisation to great heights of excellence in pursuing a purpose or goal' (Van Zyl, 1998). An organization that is devoid of ongoing commitment, enforcement and strong leadership concerning business ethics and how it treats its employees cannot achieve success.

An African Management Philosophy based on Ubuntu

Given that we are speaking about hotels in Africa, it is important to embrace and African paradigm and worldview when considering leadership in hotels. (Seny Kan, Apitsa & Adegbite, 2015; Gumede, 2017). The notion of Ubuntu in South Africa is a maxim or metaphor that states that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I exist because of others). It illustrates the communal conscience of the human spirit and is opposed to individualistic behaviour which is not cognizant of others. Hotels state they are



premised on stakeholder-centred approached in their operations and in their business ethics as opposed to shareholder-centred approaches. If this is indeed true, then their method resonates with Africa Ubuntu philosophy, where any organisation is of necessity perceived as a community comprising of diverse members.

There are of course numerous African Management philosophies including inter alia indigenous knowledge systems and national culture (Nkomo, 2006; 2011), harmonious leadership (Khoza, 2012) and Ubuntu (Mangaliso, 2001; Nicolaidis, 2015). Each of these are founded on the latter code of Ubuntu. The focus is thus on Ubuntu as the very core of a human being. A person with a Ubuntu spirit upholds good values, they help others, are not threatened by others ability, but rather support and help them in their weaknesses (Nicolaidis & Sumbana, 2011).

Using Ubuntu to good effect

In a hotel context, Ubuntu is demonstrated by individuals supporting each other to grow and develop in their skill set or reduce their weaknesses. It promotes social relations by the display of "humanity towards others". Individuals or groups in a hotel workplace will show respect, and inner goodness towards others will make their relationships stronger and more effective towards sustainability and job enjoyment. Stakeholders relationships are made stronger through Ubuntu principles. This will also create solidarity amongst the stakeholder group, especially the employees due to stronger relationships built. By involving the employees in deciding the common set of values by which to operate, managers will have their buy-in, as it is their values to live by. Each can hold the other accountable for working and living by the set values. Co-operative teamwork is stressed in Ubuntu (Nkomo, 2006).

Values such as integrity and accountability displayed towards employees will help to ensure management makes the correct decisions with regards to the planet and protecting our heritage for future generations. Empowerment and inclusivity will ensure a more ethical workplace, ensure employees are motivated and cared for and developed in their chosen careers. A happier and better work environment is created through an Ubuntu value system. This leads increased in profits for the hotel and bodes well for sustainability. The employees will have common interests and tend to feel the same about certain aspects or topics related to their work as well as experience a sense of solidarity, caring, compassion, humanness, respect, sharing and dignity (Marnewick, Erasmus & Joseph, 2018; Metz, 2007) Most important is mutual respect, which is key in society and any business to ensure everyone has a sense of belonging, affirming each other and ensuring that a humanist philosophy is continued (Nicolaidis & Sumbana, 2011).

The Root of Values

The values governing conduct are products of the normative responses from within a system and form the basis of all moral reasoning. To put it plainly, African ethics is part of a social quintessence that has strong cultural roots and presents itself in actions and behaviours which are ultimately aimed at guaranteeing the survival of the system from which they emanate. The roots of African life, culture and value systems, in Southern Africa, are found in the philosophy of Ubuntu (Nussbaum, 2013) as well as in the imported Judaeo-Christian tradition. Both Ubuntu and Christianity call for caring for others and for upholding moral integrity. In Ubuntu, it is only through others that a person can be considered to be a person- '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*'. It is only through *imbizo* or participation, that all people are treated inclusively and have their suggestions and ideas considered and they are treated with human dignity. Ubuntu has its foundation on democratic ideals and



welcomes consultation and inclusivity from all role-players in all walks of life (Ohajuwa & Mji, 2018) and this can be translated into the workplace. Only by having a common set of mutually inclusive values in place, which are embraced by all employees, can a business have any hope of truly ethical business conduct. Ubuntu transcends cultures and is a strong unifier of all peoples irrespective of race or creed. In fact the Platonic-Aristotelian traditions of individual and social virtues is highly compatible with Ubuntu. Communalism as observed in Ubuntu is critical as it asserts that individuals are not alone, but belongs to a broader inclusive community. The wellbeing of the whole group is important and not merely individuals (Nicolaidis, 2015; Edoho, 2001).

What prevents businesses internalizing the value systems of ubuntu? Egoism and self-centredness and especially the ethic of self-preservation are clearly major hurdles to cross, It is nonetheless necessary for the business world to adopt a common set of values from all employees and incorporate these into a code-of-conduct or a credo for use by business. The value systems espoused by businesses in South Africa should thus include aspects such as codes of conduct and credos as these will guide them to function with integrity and uphold a strong ethical stance even in turbulent economic times. These value systems should be based on a wide range of philosophies, especially including ubuntu, as the majority of employees in South Africa are black and embrace this philosophy (Nicolaidis, 2014). Ubuntu can be integrated into hotel and hospitality values with relative ease as many of its values, for example, integrity, care for others, pride in performance and safety, are all in harmony with what responsible businesses should be instilling in all their employees (Nicolaidis, 2014). The ethics of Ubuntu is the pursuit of equity and justice and the protection of an individual's rights and needs parallel to those of others. Its focal paradigm is the evaluation of self in relation to others.

What happens on the ground?

Work in a hotel is not purely a contractual relationship with people having obligations to each other. It is essentially a service. So that when one becomes part of the personnel of a business, he or she is making a commitment to the community and society at large. If value-systems are in place and followed by all employees, every employee will be valued and included in the decision making process and strive to share with others, always acting ethically correctly. In truth many African businesses do not act out ethical behaviour in their conduct with clients, and many employees act unethically in their place of employ (Nicolaidis & Sumbana, 2011).

Many businesses bribe decision-makers in other companies to award them contracts and this in itself affects all employees indiscriminately and influences the behaviour of employees and customers in unpredictable ways. The truth is that any business which fails to take cognizance of the welfare of its customers, is ultimately dysfunctional, and will eventually lose them to their competitors in the marketplace. Such a business is also likely to ignore the essentiality of a healthy workplace environment and will consequently also experience an abnormally rapid rate of employee turnover. In especially turbulent economic times, a business, which opts to go the ethical route, will have greater prospects for success and will ensure the sustainability of the enterprise. There should be no place for self-preservation at the expense of others, and corruption in African business (Nicolaidis, 2014; Nicolaidis & Sumbana, 2011). . In South Africa, the Constitution of the country is quite clear on the fundamental principle of honesty (Section 195[1], Constitution of the Republic of South Africa). Businesses and individuals are accountable and obliged to explain their actions if these are contrary to the values of society, and they are expected to act ethically, i.e. apply the values of society to their actions at all times.



South African society and business are opposed to bribery. This does not, of course suggest that bribery is not occurring. Clearly, business has a major role to play in promoting acceptable business practice conduct. Once a business opts to use bribery to obtain favoured status, it promotes the corruption of regulatory institutions, whereas it should in essence be trying to strengthen the regulatory framework and all its institutions (Rossouw, 2002).

There are many reasons why businesses may act unethically. Greed and the total disregard for business codes of conduct are but two reasons (Bayat & Meyer, 1994). In Africa, as indeed in other parts of the globe, many businesses are dysfunctional because their managers are simply not willing to transform their enterprises in terms of ethical practice, and thus disregard what is in essence managerial wisdom in practice. According to the United Nations, corruption and bribery is rife in most African countries and this fact undermines the prospects for economic investments on the continent by foreign firms. Sadly, the greatest impact of corruption and bribery is on the poor who are unable to absorb its costs (Cookey, 2005). Corruption and bribery, whether at the governmental or business levels, results in reduced investments and even de-investment in some cases. It is common practice for many national and international companies in Africa to conduct business by offering bribes in order to secure business and undercut their legitimate competitors in the marketplace.

In South Africa, there are more and more cases of corruption in business and these are considered to be a manifestation of the moral disintegration of society and the natural result of great poverty and ethnic discrimination (Mafunisa, 2000). Corruption, including bribery, lowers the levels of ethical consciousness in the society in which it manifests itself *on an ongoing basis* (Ferrel *et al*, 2002). The criminal justice process is a major deterrent for corruption in society as many would be perpetrators are fearful of the consequences of their actions (Rich, 1975). As a society accepts relatively minor infractions of the law as being in line with what is considered to be acceptable behaviour, it is likely that people in that society will become ethically desensitized and unethical behaviour becomes reinforced as the norm (Baack *et al*, 2000). According to Kohlberg (1981), people are orientated towards social norms and are judged by others in terms of how they comply when they are what he calls the conventional stage of moral development. By means of contrast, those beyond the conventional stage behave in ways, which can be evaluated according to normative standards that are based on principles. The implication of this is that if ethical behaviour in the workplace is to become part of an employee's mindset, it is essential for the underlying ethical principles to be recognized, understood and internalised by employees.

Desired actions

Hotels should strive for the inclusion of all employees in the decision-making process, irrespective of rank in the operational hierarchy. Corruption in any shape or form must be condemned out-of-hand. The opinions of all employees should be considered seriously and valued. Employees need to feel a sense of worth and ownership in whatever role they play in a hotel and will commit themselves more to their employer as a consequence of such acknowledgement on the part of their employers. This is clearly one aspect, which is lacking in most South African businesses. Employees generally do simply not trust their employers, who they see as narcissistic promoters of ESP. There is no *esprit d'corps* between the employees and the employer in such businesses and in most cases, employees are not treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.



In African society, a manager who disrespects his employees is at once considered to devoid of decency and humanity, and such a manager is not taken seriously at the best of times. African society is for the most part, highly compassionate as evidenced in ubuntu. Individuals will share with the have-nots in their society and will strive to uplift them. Such regard for others leads to greater sustainability in African society. Whilst such behaviour is paid lip-service to in most businesses, in practice, it is not supported as most businesses are caught up in ESP. While western business models tend to focus on 'the bottom-line' and narcissism, African businesses are more committed to uplifting society and creating a new workable community in which all can prosper. This is not to say that some black managed companies are also not ESP promoters.

It is the CEO, General Manager and other leaders who sets the tone and develops the strategic long-term vision of a business. They has the power to mould the behaviour of all employees in the business. Business is a metronome for society and the actions of its leaders set models in place for individual as well as group behaviour. They morality these individuals exhibit begin as a set of culturally defined values and are generally gradually inculcated as habits. In African society, ubuntu and Christian morality are the cornerstones of moral behaviour, and yet unethical conduct takes place daily. The point is that business is about people and business ethics concerns how we treat employees and customers as well as all the other stakeholders.

Employee empowerment against ESP

Another aspect which deserves attention is employee empowerment, which has been receiving greater attention than was the case in the past (Zani & Pietrantonio, 2001). There is no doubt that empowerment of employees goes a long way in fostering an ethical workplace ethos. Much literature supports the view that the major determinant of empowerment, by category, is the psychological variables affecting it (Menon & Hartmann, 2000, Dimitriadis, 2002). By empowering or 'granting power' to an employee, a business is seen to be acting ethically as it is considering the employee's human dignity and is according him/her a status of worth. The employee has a sense of having free choice in "initiating and regulating" his or her actions (Spreitzer, 1995; Nicolaidis, 2014) and is able to shape his/her work role and context. In essence, employees have a locus of control in which they believe that they, rather than external forces, determine what happens in their workplace environments and thus feel empowered. To empower employees is neither excessive nor unique, it is the right thing to do. It should be part and parcel of fair treatment of all employees.

There is an erroneous perception in many African businesses that because employees are not all in management positions, they are not concerned about ethical questions. In fact, the more they are involved in the decision-making process and participate, the more they will feel the desire to be part of an ethically responsible workplace. Any management style which stifles the individual and does not respect human dignity, is problematic, for in such a workplace ethical behaviour is less likely to be maintained. Such autocratic management styles are thus deleterious to both employees and employers and therefore to the community at large. A business's dynamic core of human interaction cannot be ignored. Any style of management which fosters self-centredness is antithetical to the creation and maintenance of a sustainable business operation.

If employees are not sufficiently empowered, they will perceive themselves to be separate entities and will make all decisions based on ESP (Irvin, 2002). They will



thus not take into account the effect of their actions on those around them, either in the workplace or in society, and will have their moral reasoning inhibited to the detriment of all who may come into contact with them. A hotel that empowers its employees will have enlightened leaders who are also the initiators of new values. These leaders will of necessity, strive for creating a sense of commitment and ownership in all employees and make certain that all the values proposed by them are in harmony with the basic goals of the business and be part of its processes. According to Bass (1990), 'The organizational philosophy includes its assumptions, values, foci of attention, priorities, and goals and the techniques it promulgates to implement its efforts. Clearly its philosophy and culture overlap and reinforce each other in determining what is the right thing to do and what is important and good'. As such, leaders of businesses are thus important developers of business philosophy and drive the value system of their business. It is incumbent upon them to co-opt all employees in the decision-making process concerning the preparation and formulation of the business's philosophy including the code of ethics to be adhered to by all employees. Business leaders need to be concerned about employees and human relations and are obligated to consider the interests of individual employees and society into consideration.

The virtues that employees are expected to develop in the workplace must also be expressed in the culture of the business. Rules on how employees should act when practical dilemmas arise are equally important. In fact the modes of expected behaviour in given scenarios should be spelled out clearly for all employees who should be empowered to act as they see fit within given parameters of behaviour. It is only in this way that ESP can be effectively countered and the welfare of all be upheld in business practice. The leaders' total buy-in to Ubuntu practices and ethical conduct is non-negotiable and they should be interactive and collaborate totally in upholding codes of ethics or credos in the workplace. It is the role of leaders to be effective managers of the values espoused in a business (Peters & Waterman, 1982).

Conclusion

A company is interdependent by a myriad of relationships that include employees, customers, suppliers and communities. A company has a moral responsibility to enhance the human beings of those it relates to and in a hotel, the managers should maintain relationships by having compassion, caring and responsiveness. It is necessary to clearly spell out what the business wishes to achieve in terms of its mission and its long-term strategic plan. It must also address the question of how it will face up to the multiplicity of environmental challenges and opportunities (McDonald, 2000).

It is not simply a question of drawing up a list of values considered to be important, but to rather discuss with employees which values are considered important to ethical business conduct. What is essential is that the values that a business intends to operate by need to be credible and consistent and place in a hierarchical order of importance from most essential value first. A hotel cannot simply ignore the fact that it employs people from different religious, socio-cultural and political backgrounds. Each person may thus differ from the next in that he or she emanates from a society, which has a somewhat unique, if not similar, value system. A hotel manager has a duty to foster a harmonious interpersonal relation with all employees who have the capacity to recognize and show solidarity towards the company and also to be identified and benefit from the hotel's cohesion.



Managers need to offer proper training and development to employees who are likely to stay longer then, and make a lifelong career out of work in a hotel. It is thus also required that the value systems of an employee need to be respected by his or her fellow employees and places management in a position where it is obliged to acknowledge cultural diversity in the workplace and sensitize employees to this. After this process, the values accepted by all should be communicated to all through a code-of-conduct or a credo. Without the total formal commitment of the senior management, it is unlikely that the rest of the employees will buy into the code-of-conduct or credo.

Young individuals attracted to the lively hotel environment and accessibility of hospitality work may lack the skills to defend themselves against behaviours such as sexual harassment and unfair dismissal and those described earlier. The effect on hotels is that older managers may find it easy to exploit young and enthusiastic staff, and the effect on profitability is the cost of a very high staff turnover as the employees' eagerness to serve diminishes. While the hotel manager may offer a vision, it is necessary for the employees to buy into this vision. Judgments may need to be made with regard to differing viewpoints on an ethical issue. If ethical behaviour is to be achieved, the whole business structure, from top to bottom, must be totally committed to Ubuntu. The best way, of course, to achieve an Ubuntu ethical business conduct from all employees is for the leaders of the business to be perfect role-models for their employees.

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