



Applying Colin Powell's and Abraham Lincoln's Theories on Leadership to Africa's State of Affairs: Some Pointers for African Leaders *

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It has been difficult to produce political leaders who are dedicated to the wellbeing of ordinary Africans. Frequently, leaders tend to be more interested in their welfare and the well-being of their extended family system and associates. What my preceding postulations suggest is that African rulers have not imbibed the tenets of the superbly crafted Mombasa Declaration and the Code of Leadership of March 20, 2004, that provides an excellent and exemplary template for an ideal chief. In fact, this Declaration, inter-alia, states:

Good leaders globally guide government of nation-states to perform effectively for their citizens. They deliver high security for the state and the person; a functioning rule of law; education; health; and a framework conducive to economic growth. They ensure effective arteries of commerce and enshrine personal and human freedoms. They empower civil society and protect the environmental commons. Crucially, good leaders also provide their citizens with a sense of belonging to a national enterprise of which everyone can be proud. They knit rather than unravel their nations and seek to be remembered for how they have bettered the lives of the governed rather than the fortunes of the few [plutocratic oligarchs].¹

My following discussions allude briefly to two overlapping models—those of Powell and Lincoln—that could, mutatis mutandis, be helpful to African leaders in combination with the inspiring code of leadership in their governance techniques for advancing the good governance project in Africa. In order to pursue this line of



investigation, I mined two seminal works: *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*,² and *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*.³ A summary of the contents of these stirring volumes on leadership provide the springboard from which to tackle my suppositions. I shall highlight some of the major dogmas, dictums and principles in these works for the purpose of amplifying and explaining their values for executives in general and African leaders in particular.

Collin Powell's Theories on Leadership

In my following analyses, I shall discuss Powell's opinion on a few elements of leadership that a good and conscientious political boss (in conjunction with subordinates) should appreciate, cultivate and practice in order to be an effective chief. For the purpose of this presentation, however, my emphasis is on providing a compass of sorts for those who are already leaders and those who seek political captainship in African societies. Some of Powell's key positions to be discussed are: 1. success often breeds failure; 2. the need to challenge professionals and experts; and 3. the trust factor.⁴

Success Often Breeds Failure

Special to this theoretical admonition is that leaders who become successful tend to rest on their laurels and may also become contented.⁵ The rationale for this behavioral pattern frequently stemmed in part from associates flattering their leader and touting the regime's successes in the polity so much so that leaders tended to fail to understand and see future challenges that they might have to undertake or confront. An assumption is that having attained a spectacular success say in boosting the national economy, the situation would always remain that way.

Indeed, to illustrate this dilemma, Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton have noted in the Nigerian case that "Government revenues from petroleum were a mere N200, 000 in 1958, the first year of commercial production. Revenues in 1970 were N166 million, but they rose exponentially from that time. In 1974 revenues from petroleum were N3.7 billion and in 1976 they were over N5.3 billion."⁶ Rather than investing robustly in the country's infrastructure and Research and Development (R&D) the regime went on a spending spree on items that did not add much value to the overall wellbeing of the society.⁷ In short, the leaders at that time deluded themselves



and country that this fortune in crude oil would last ad infinitum. All the same, the failure of this policy was not long in coming. In fact, the outcome of that failure to invest wisely was so disastrous that Africans who had migrated from neighboring countries to Nigeria to partake in the oil boom, fortune and feast were summarily and unceremoniously chased out of the country.⁸

A leader's approach to dealing with the issue of complacency is to look beyond the façade of what appears to be a temporary success and to find possible weaknesses even in that success and to tackle it.⁹ In essence, a shrewd leader should be alert and visionary. S/he, according to Powell, should "wage war on smugness and arrogance, ... [must] not accept things at face value, ... [must] not fall prey to the alluring descriptions of the Peacock Throne, ... [must] remember that success can breed failure, and that complacency is the enemy..., [therefore], dig, dig, and dig some more, ... it is the leader's responsibility to constantly and proactively probe below the surface."¹⁰

The Need to Challenge Professionals and Experts

A cliché and advice that issue from the importance of challenging expert opinions and recommendations on a policy strategy is articulated in the view that "every organization [even a so-called Think Tank] should tolerate rebels who tell the emperor he has no clothes on."¹¹ Arguably, a rationale for a boss to remain cautious to the counsels of experts flow from the possibility that because they are members of a privileged group they are likely to promote policies that further the group's concerns, and not necessarily the interests of the nation-state. In such a milieu, it is not uncommon for well-crafted theories and regimes prepared for a leader by experts to fail woefully when implemented; this is so simply because the chief failed to acknowledge the problem of such policies on a broader society. Germane to my preceding supposition is the need for a leader to pay attention to other opinions beyond those of experts before finally implementing a policy for an entire polity.

In some African countries, however, this wise guidance might be problematic from a cultural standpoint. Indeed, it has been argued that in many African states elders and leaders tend to resist attempts to interrogate their wisdom and decisions made as a result of their strong belief that they are the custodians of knowledge; and therefore their decisions are sacrosanct and must not be questioned.¹² Consequently, the trustees of



African states are often reluctant to accommodate opposing views and to subject their policies to public examination.¹³ But this should not be the case in a democracy. Little wonder, then, that it has been suggested that leaders should be “flexible” in their formulation of policies and not to over-rely on the recommendations of experts on decision-making no matter how well-intended such advisers might be especially in diverse societies.

In this regard, the reflection and view of a former Brazilian president, Fernando H. Cardoso, is instructive when he averred: “Some may argue that there is no need for accommodation or compromise; politicians should simply abide by an ethic of responsibility and follow what they believe to be the most sensible and rewarding course, regardless of any technical consideration. I am afraid that today’s world does not allow for such a facile situation. Be it in the developed or in the developing world, politicians, once in office, are supposed to respond to an increasingly wide range of social interests [that very often clash].”¹⁴

The Trust Factor

An absence of trust for politicians has been one of the reasons why Africa has had problems producing leaders with legitimacy. But trust is critical for a leader’s integrity because it could generate support from fellow compatriots. How, then, can trust be fostered by a boss? It is essential for a leader to cultivate those ethical qualities and personal characteristics that are worthy of emulation since such attributes could induce citizens to display confidence in a leader. In this regard, a leader’s acquisition of *savoir faire* in the art of politics should be imperative. In sum, “leaders with character stand for something—a value, an ideal, a cause, a mission. Moreover, leaders with character don’t just talk about these things. They exhibit a coherent pattern of behaviors that demonstrates what they stand for [and commit themselves to meeting the goal].”¹⁵ A good example might be a commitment to organizing a free and fair election in order to promote democratic consolidation and peaceful coexistence.

Abraham Lincoln’s Theories on Leadership

Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was president of the United States from 1861-1865. He united the country after a civil war and also freed the slaves. My discussions that follow highlight some of his theories relating to personal comportment



that are useful for an efficient leader. For the purpose of this paper, I shall briefly discuss the following: 1. **Honesty and Integrity are the Best Policies**; 2. master the art of public speaking; and 3. preach a vision and continually reaffirm it.¹⁶ In truth, these are instructive suppositions imperative for Africa's current and future political chiefs.

Honesty and Integrity are the Best Policies

Donald Phillips summarizes the above theory and entreaty to a leader and associates in relation to, and collaboration of, their role in the successful governance of a society. Accordingly, the following injunctions and recommendations are offered:

1. Give your subordinates a fair chance with equal freedom and opportunity for successes.
2. You must set, and respond to fundamental goals and values that move your followers.
3. You must be consistently fair and decent in both the business and the personal side of life...
4. It is your duty to advance the aims of the organization and also to help those who serve it.
5. If you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem.¹⁷

The above factors are important for leaders to imbibe; they are, nevertheless, tough for politicians to implement having spent much of their electoral campaigns promising exaggeratingly what they would do for their fellow compatriots if elected. Even so, it is crucial for a smart leader to deconstruct election political strategies after balloting and reconstitute them for the good of country when assembling men and women to work with. It would suffice to inculcate some, if not all, of the above pleas if a leader wishes to be effective in governing a political system.

Master the Art of Public Speaking

Lincoln's advice on this important matter for an efficient leader is captured in the following inspiring statements:

Be your organization's best stump-speaker, with droll ways and dry jokes.

Extemporaneous speaking is your avenue to the public.

Use a variety of body language when you speak.



Prepare yourself thoroughly for your public speaking engagements...

Remember that there will be times when you should simply not speak. Say to your listeners: "Kindly let me be silent."

Try not to make mistakes when you speak publicly. Every-thing you say is intently heard. If you make a mistake it doesn't merely affect you but the organization as well... 18

When all important issues are debated organizational and policies are crafted, it often takes effective speeches to convince and motivate audiences and citizens to support and implement regimes aimed at promoting good governance. It is not always the content of a message that galvanizes audiences into action in support of a national program or a leader's vision for the society; it is frequently the manner, style and humor in the way that it is delivered that could. In this regard, I have argued elsewhere that in order to promote efficacious policies a ruler should be able to articulate the aims of such a project with eloquence in "Churchillian, Reaganesque and Castroan" oratorical skill.¹⁹

Accordingly, a thorough preparation and rehearsal may be called for. It might also call for an excellent speech-writer and coach if the leader is not endowed with a skill in public speaking. A lesson to be learned from the preceding conjecture is that leaders are often remembered for their bad speeches.

Preach a Vision and Continually Reaffirm It

Traits of the foregoing notional suggestion are:

1. Provide a clear, concise statement of the direction of your organization [or cabinet], and justify the action you take.
2. Everywhere you go, at every conceivable opportunity, reaffirm, reassert, and remind everyone of the basic principles upon which your organization was founded.
3. Effective visions can't be forced on the masses. Rather, you must set them in motion by means of persuasion...
4. When you preach your vision, don't shoot too high. Aim lower and the common people will understand you. They are the ones you want to reach—at least they are the ones you ought to reach.



5. When effecting renewal, call on the past, relate it to the present, and then use them both to provide a link to the future...20

If a leader seeks power only for the purpose of self-aggrandizement and enriching close subordinates and relatives, the pursuit of positive vision for a society will suffer. Equally, a constructive vision is one in which most fellow citizens are beneficiaries in a nation-state.

Anecdotally such an optimistic vision could be that of providing universal primary education (UPE) in Africa. In fact, in a continent in which illiteracy rate, overall, hovers over 50 percent, such a policy could hit home run for much of the society. This is particularly the case as evidence suggests that the more people are educated, the more they are likely to exculpate themselves and family from a cycle of poverty. The foregoing “truism” needs to be sold to the public by a leader and his or her associates with data to support such a claim. A strong argument could also be made that those who received primary school education are more likely to attend secondary schools and later tertiary institutions.

These educated cadres are individuals who would end up paying taxes for the sustainment of their society. These members of the informed public are those likely to agitate, individually or through membership in civil society organizations, for democratic consolidation, good governance and political stability. Leaders could support their preachments on the virtues of education by referencing the spectacular development in the Occident as a product of excellent education system and education itself of citizens in these societies. What is particularly sanguine with advancing positive vision is that it could be replicated in many areas of governance such as improving national security, enhancing democracy, improving national economy and upholding human rights, for example.

Politically, leaders who apply the theories discussed in my paper and who place the interests of the nation-state above their insular desires are likely, within the rule of law, to organize free and fair elections and in the process deepen democracy in their polities. My rationale for the preceding assumptions rests on the hypothesis that a leader that leads effectively should not be troubled that s/he might not be re-elected.



Even so, it is corrupt leaders who rig, cheat and fix elections so that they would win. Conversely, good leaders organize free and fair elections critical for paving the way for peace, social harmony, democratic solidity and consolidation.

*This paper is an abridgement of a chapter in a forthcoming book: *Leadership and the Problem of Electoral Democracy in Africa: Case Studies and Theoretical Solutions*.

Notes

¹ See Robert I. Rotberg, *Africa: Progress and Problems of Governance and Leadership in Africa* (Philadelphia, PA: Mason Crest Publishers, 2007), p. 34.

² Oren Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002)

³ Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* (New York: Warner Books, 1992)

⁴ See Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*. Other theoretical suggestions for a leader are: people make victories possible and recruiting and promoting subordinates.

⁵ Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, p. 81.

⁶ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 182; See IMF, International Financial Statistics, Various Years: Central Bank of Nigeria, *Annual Report* (1986), pp. 86, 101; Kelechi Kalu, *Economic Development and Nigerian Foreign Policy* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), p. 91.

⁷ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 183; Nwafejoku O. Uwadibie, "Oil and Macroeconomic Policies in the Twenty-First Century," in E. Ike Udogu (ed.), *Nigeria in the Twenty-First Century: Strategies for Political Stability and Peaceful Coexistence* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), p. 76.

⁸ See "Ghanaians, Expelled by Nigeria, Return Home to Start Over," *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/12/world/ghanaians-expelled-by-nigeria-return-home-to-start-over.html> (Retrieved 2/1/15)

⁹ Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, p. p. 92.

¹¹ Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, p. 93.



¹² Wisdom J. Tettey, “Human Agency and Democratic Challenges in Africa,” *Africa Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2000), p. 25.

¹³ E. Ike Udogu, “Reviving Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria’s Current Politics: A Concise Analysis,” *Africa Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (August 2004), p. 82.

¹⁴ Address by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso at the Inter-American Dialogue Conference on “Democracy and Leadership Challenges in Latin America” Washington, DC (December 18, 2003), p. 1. <http://www.thedialogue.org/publications/programs/policy/politics>. (Retrieved 1/30/15); see also E. Ike Udogu, “The Issue of Political Leadership in the Third World: What is to be done?” *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 14.

¹⁵ Harari, *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, p. 204.

¹⁶ See Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*. Other theoretical pointers for a leader are: get out of the office and circulate among the troops; build strong alliances; persuade rather than coerce; lead by been led; set goal and be result-oriented; and encourage innovation.

¹⁷ Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Philip, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*, p. 154.

¹⁹ E. Ike Udogu, The Issue of Political Leadership in the Third World: What is to be done? *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 1.

²⁰ Phillip, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*, pp. 162-169.

Colin Powell on Leadership. By shmula, Last Updated September 11, 2007. Twitter. " Good leadership involves responsibility to the welfare of the group, which means that some people will get angry at your actions and decisions. It's inevitable " if you're honorable. Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity. You avoid the tough decisions, you avoid confronting the people who need to be confronted, and you avoid offering differential rewards based on differential performance because some people might get upset. Plans don't accomplish anything, either. Theories of management don't matter. Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds." (END AUDIO TAPE) POWELL: Let me pause and review some of the key elements of this conversation that you just heard between these two officers. First, they acknowledge that our colleague, Mohamed ElBaradei, is coming, and they know what he's coming for, and they know he's coming the next day. He's coming to look for things that are prohibited. In case that name isn't immediately familiar to you, General Saadi has been the Iraqi regime's primary point of contact for Dr. Blix and Dr. ElBaradei. It was General Saadi who last fall publicly pledged that Iraq was prepared to cooperate unconditionally with inspectors.

