

LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS: THE CASE OF PROFESSOR WANGARI MAATHAI

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ABSTRACT

*In this paper, the researcher discusses one of the five pairs of themes from a study that sought to explore perceptions about Maathai's leadership and to inform a theory about leadership. The study was accomplished by analyzing the perceptions about how Maathai produced leadership thus earning global recognition as an agent of change. The research involved analyzing perceptions about processes that could explain the production of Maathai's leadership. The researcher focused on general problems of leadership in Africa and acknowledged the inapplicability of theories whose research had been conducted using the lens of western concepts of leadership. Grounded theory design offered a compelling approach to systematically derive from field data a new theoretical model that takes into consideration the complexities of leadership in the African cultural contexts. The researcher analyzed perceptions of people from Kenya with leadership experience, who were familiar with the leadership of professor Maathai, and who were residing in the United States of America at the time of the study. The ARISE leadership model emerged from this study and consists of five pairs of themes with each pair carrying subthemes. Theme pairs were **education and empowerment**, socialization and selfless service, internationalization and integration, resolve and resilience, and, authenticity and self-actualization. In this paper, the theme related to education and empowerment is discussed.*

Key Words: Wangari Maathai; Leadership; Education and Empowerment

Introduction

The qualitative study explored perceptions about how the late Kenyan Nobel Prize winner, Professor Wangari Muta Maathai produced leadership that enabled her to earn global recognition as an agent of change. The researcher sought to explore perceptions about Maathai's leadership and to inform a theory about leadership. Twenty-five Kenyans living in the United States who were familiar with Maathai's leadership and who have leadership experience participated in the study as interviewees. The interviews yielded concepts about leadership. Constant comparison of the concepts emerging from the interviews yielded core categories. Abstraction of these categories to higher

order themes yielded theoretical model of leadership.

Background Information

Salawu (2012) noted that excellent leadership "seems to be a rarity in Africa" (p.17). He argued that many problems afflicting people in Africa can be attributed to poor leadership. Problems including civil wars, famine, sickness, and poverty have plagued African society over many years. The problem, according to Chinua Achebe, is founded on factors related to failure in leadership and advanced by torturous experiences related to a past tainted by colonialism and slavery (Nwagbara, 2012).

Several scholars have noted the lack of leadership models derived from a focus on

leaders in Africa (Muchiri, 2011; Walumbwa, Avolio & Aryee, 2011). Some other scholars noted the need for effective leadership in African countries that addresses the challenges faced (Auletta, 2011; Goldsmith, 2001; Haruna, 2009; Wakahiu, 2011). Research that addresses leadership in Africa and which reaches beyond the overriding methodological and empirical paradigms is therefore recommended (Bolden & Kirk, 2009).

In addressing Africa's diverse problems, existing leadership theories provide important generic lessons. However, previous studies indicate that it is unnecessary and could be inappropriate for leaders in Africa to rely on western-based organizational models as the cultural contexts vary (Adeleye, 2011; Ngugi, 2009). The reason, as Nkomo (2006) asserted, is that whereas western management styles often advocate euro-centrism, individualism, and modernity, Africa's management styles incorporate myths and underscores the spirit of traditions, community, co-operation, and teamwork.

Canchu (2007) cautions that considering the level of globalization today, an understanding of leadership in other cultural contexts should not be entirely informed by western concepts of leadership. A theoretical model that is applicable in Africa could perhaps help address the catastrophic failure of leadership and governance and help explore ways of fixing problems. One way of developing such a model is by identifying role models for leadership and documenting the processes that explain the production of their type of leadership. A leadership model derived from proven leaders can serve as a learning tool for current and upcoming leaders thus enhancing opportunities for good leadership. Maathai was identified as such a leader for this study.

As a leader, Maathai was noted to have been well ahead of her time in position, action, and ideas (Kushner, 2009). She represented an example of African women fighting the challenges and domineering systems of patriarchy and those traditions that serve to bind or oppress them. Maathai rose above many social, cultural, and political limitations barriers to succeed in leadership.

Maathai's leadership was commendable and hard to ignore as illustrated by the multiple awards that recognized her leadership. Maathai was awarded two of the most prestigious national commendations by the government in Kenya for her outstanding or distinguished services to the nation. The commendations include the Elder of the Burning Spear award in 2003, and the Elder of the Golden Heart award in 2004. She also received numerous national and international awards including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Maathai's leadership exemplified community-based leadership (Bayne, 2013) and appeared to have embraced the cultural attributes of communities served.

Methodology

This qualitative, grounded theory study used semi-structured interviews as the primary procedure for collecting data. The interview was administered to 25 participants who were selected from people from Kenya, age 18 years and over, who were familiar with Maathai's work and had leadership experience. Data were collected through exploratory data collection methods that are known for convenience, that allow reputational case selection, chain referral selection, recommendations from individuals, selection for specific characteristics selection for optimal conditions, and that are not dependent on representation,

The data in the study were analyzed primarily using constant comparative analysis with the aid of the QSR International's NVivo 10 software (NVivo), a data management computer software package, to determine emergent and recurrent themes

Data Analysis

In discussing the leadership of Wangari Maathai, participants used words such as; "trailblazer", "vision", "passion", "servant leader", "fearless", "courage", "radical", "transform", and "empower". Participants described Maathai as a trailblazer in education, careers, and positions who did not seek to follow established paths but rather chose to create new ones where there were none. Maathai was described as passionate and one who appeared to have a connection and chemistry with nature and the environment. "As a visionary, she was a dreamer who knew what she wanted to see happen" said one participant. Another participant described Maathai as a woman of influence who could stand against all odds as demonstrated by her struggles against a powerful regime that sought to privatize, reassign, or degrade public land, including Karura forest and Uhuru Park which were key public forest reserve and recreational park in Nairobi, Kenya. Maathai faced public humiliation, was physically beaten, and even imprisoned, and the then President Daniel Arap Moi publicly called her a mad woman in a public address.

The study participants highlighted Maathai's leadership characteristics/traits using terms such as; "courage", "vision", "radical", "pace setter", "authentic", "intelligent", "passion", "selfless", and "mobilizer." Participants described Maathai as one with a vision and a brilliant trailblazer with many firsts including:

- 1st woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate
- 1st chair of Anatomy and Veterinary Department,
- 1st woman professor at Nairobi University
- 1st Kenyan to win a Nobel Peace Prize

Participants noted that Maathai had a voice in academia, a voice in politics, and a voice in rural areas where local women were not often educated. She never shied away even when she had to endure difficult challenges. A participant noted that Maathai empowered those she interacted with urging them to work with whatever little they had and encouraging them to have self-confidence.

A participant who indicated that she/he had accompanied Maathai on many grass root events described her as "really unbound with a strong personality, a go-getter, hardworking, selfless, and one who led by example". Another participant stated that Maathai was very down-to-earth, and she could forget her position of power and level of education and step down to the level of her audience.

Study participants identified factors that could have influenced Maathai's leadership including education, empowerment, socialization, selfless service, international connections and integration, resolve and resilience, authenticity and self-actualization. Because of her education, as soon as Maathai went back to Kenya after studying in the United States of America, she got involved in community engagement including women groups and other civic organizations. Education opened gates for her and enabled her to have courage and to speak with authority. "Maathai grew up when women were not respected or acknowledged, and being that educated, she seemed determined to bring some respectability to the women whether

educated or not educated” observed one participant.

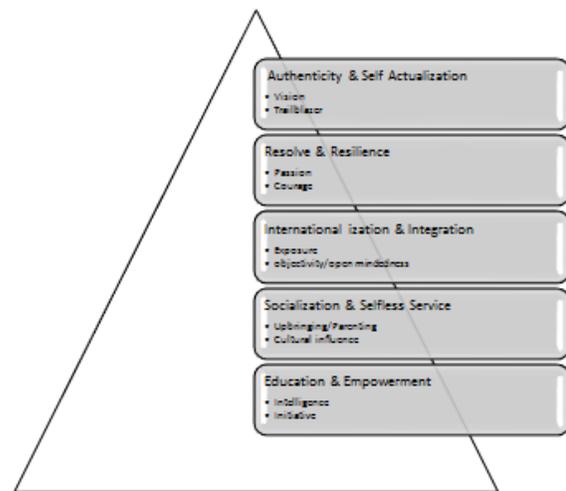
In discussing processes that could help produce Maathai’s leadership, participants identified; “education”, “socialization”, “providing equal opportunities”, “mentoring”, “nurturing”, “exposure”, “diversity”, and “recognition.” Participants noted that Maathai was highly educated and argued that providing equal access to educational opportunities at all levels was important. Some parents have given boys privileges in education while the girls stayed home doing chores. One participant stated that children need to know “Gutiri wa nda na wa mugongo,” which translates from Kikuyu to English as “none originate from the womb while the other is from the back,” and implies that all children should be treated equal.

Participants noted that many girls or women drop out of school before attaining higher education thus denying themselves opportunity for higher-level jobs. Participants suggested that factors leading to girls dropping out of school need to be addressed, and girls need to be given the opportunity to go back to school with financial support provided as needed. For years, non-traditional education opportunities have been almost non-existent in Kenya. The mindset need to change and align with other developed societies where parents, even mothers can still pursue an education even as they cater for their families. Participants noted that certain opportunities are unavailable unless you have higher education. For example, in Kenya one cannot be a member of parliament if he or she does not have a bachelor’s degree, so if women drop out of school, only men would get such opportunities. Education also plays a major role in promoting courage and self-

confidence thus opening new opportunities for educated people.

Results

Based on the perceptions of 25 participants, Maathai’s leadership can be summarized into a theoretical framework represented by the ARISE leadership model. The model takes into consideration an environment under which Maathai operated which was described as consisting of a hostile leadership and oppressive to one gender. The ARISE leadership model recognizes the influence of education and empowerment in leadership.



ARISE leadership model emerging from grounded theory.

Theme 1: Education and Empowerment.

A United States senator, John F. Kennedy, stated on February 12, 1960, "Education is, in truth, the only key to genuine African independence and progress" (Shachtman, 2009, p.76). One hundred percent of those who took part in this study agreed with this view pointing out that education empowers and is a major factor for success in leadership. Participants noted that education opened gates for Maathai and enabled her to be courageous, to have a global perspective, and to speak with authority. Maathai was the first woman in East and Central Africa to

earn a doctorate. She went to school at an early age when many girls in her local village did not attend school. Her intelligence and hard work in school earned her great opportunities to advance her education. The education, in turn, opened for her positions that would otherwise have been unavailable to her, including faculty positions at the University of Nairobi. Because she was empowered, Maathai was able to empower others. She trained and educated women in local communities through grass root movements and empowered them to take charge of their lives.

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Conclusion

Education and empowerment provides the leader with knowledge and skills giving them an opportunity to speak with authority particularly in their field of expertise. ARISE leadership model advocates for education and empowerment for all. The resulting leadership model serves as a call for people to arise and maximize their potential; to seek empowerment through education as well as other opportunities. It is a call for those in leadership to reevaluate existing systems to determine if access to educational resources and opportunities is fair and just, and can provide equal opportunities for all to excel and reach their full potential.

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