

Chapter 7

The African service Renaissance

*There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries*

*On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.*

(Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)

These words were uttered by Cassius while urging his compatriots to proceed with the plot to murder Julius Caesar and they were sufficiently powerful to motivate them to accomplish their mission. The wisdom of the Shakespearean era is also symbolic of contemporary African society. For, in the order of wealth of nations, most of the countries on our continent have hit the bottom of the poverty pit and are now either levelling out or emerging from the abyss.

African Renaissance is the vanguard of change currently sweeping across the continent as a new dawn to prime up cooperation and self-reliance essential for socio-economic development. As a way of giving new order to society it carries the potential of becoming more dominant than the wave of pan-Africanism which prevailed from the 1950s. This philosophy is being driven by fairly young political leaders such as presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Jerry Rawlings of Ghana and Joachim Chissano of Mozambique. In addition, the world's political and economic order is moving towards regional blocs with an all-inclusive developmental agenda. As a vehicle for

changing the orientation as well as the renewal of African society, the concept of renaissance probably stands the best chance of all. More so, it is seen as an apolitical, purely developmental economic integration to serve hundreds of millions of customers in the region. The existence of such demarcations as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Preferential Trade Area (PTA), the Economic Organisation of West African states (Ecowas) and the East African Community Trading Bloc should provide a solid foundation for African Renaissance.

THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

To the African continent reality is becoming increasingly challenging as some of the Western countries shift their stance from supportive to sceptical. There are no more automatic financial handouts, and they now seek some quid pro quo instead. A similarly coordinated reaction is apparent from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Paris Club and others.

Another challenge arises from the more critical internal expectations of our society today. These range from good governance and improved quality of life to a progressive economy with its resultant benefits. A few decades ago it was rare to stage demonstrations about social issues against a democratically elected government. Today it is common practice in most of our cities.

Further challenges arise from the onslaught of the virtual village because of the technological explosion. The arrival of Internet and the information superhighway has shrunk the world to a common market of homogeneous needs. Local providers of seemingly basic services now face competition from challengers from USA and Europe. The deciding factor is no longer just who produces the best product, but who follows up with more effective, personal and value-added services. For many direct consumer goods such as electrical appliances, educational material, do-it-yourself domestic items and even basic medical supplies one can order on

the Internet from any destination in the world within seconds and receive them within 24 hours. A case in point is AMWAY (that is, American Way) which is a mail order supplier of a comprehensive range of household supplies. It has taken Africa by storm and poses serious competition to local suppliers and retailers through local distribution centres. The delivery turnaround time can be faster than a local merchant who is not geared to meet prompt requests for service. The time has come for the apathetic 'fat cats' in business to either make a total change to be highly responsive to market needs or inevitably be driven out of business. The forces of global competition are too mighty to resist and they carry no passengers.

Another reality is that production-driven economic growth has been superceded by service-oriented growth. There is a discernible shift from high-industry smoke-stack economy to high-knowledge service economy. Therefore, the critical success factor is no longer how you make a commodity but whether you produce what the customers want, make it available when, where and in the form in which they want it. Again the aftercare service resulting from product beneficiation is vital. Brand building and its sustenance are now easy because of the constant information flow across continents. Such brands as Coca Cola, McDonald's, Microsoft, Boeing, Levi Jeans, Sony and Samsung bear testimony to this foreign challenge.

Even more acute challenges emanate from a more critical African society than ever before. It is now open to internal competitiveness because of increased education. Easy and ready accessibility to the external world has brought more open-mindedness with increased capacity for imitation leading to less originality of choice. If one walks through some of the downtown streets of African cities, one might momentarily believe that one was in New York or London because of the clothes and behavioural trends.

Another distinct set of challenges are posed by the inevitability of change. A basic rule of survival now demands a predominance of innovation for improvement. The principle of incremental changes

(Japanese *Kaizen*) becomes a reality for meaningful change to occur. Second, the human race is fast becoming obsessed with electronics and IT. Think of the quantum leap electronic banking has brought to customer service in the financial services industry. Third, there will be high human mobility and less rigidity of boundaries. SADC is actively considering a common regional labour market and free trade. The East African community has made greater advances in that regard, while the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) established a common trading and monetary area a long time ago. This is bound to give rise to a more discerning mass market with some real demands on customer service. Such a large market will inevitably create a beneficial critical mass due to economies of scale, which cannot accrue to localised small markets.

CONTINUING MOMENTS OF TRUTH

Once again we revisit the phenomenon of the split seconds in which service providers interact with their customers and create first impressions. In the private sector customers will seek to judge whether the product or service is a rip-off or is beneficial to them. By the same token, political customers will want to draw a dividing line between exploitation and enriching experience. Any trace of exploitation often leads to a public outcry to embarrass the leaders and seek redress. In the public and parastatal environment attention will be focused on whether the organisation is corruption-ridden or an efficient service machinery. Professions will be judged on their capacity to add value to the service expected by their clients rather than pursue purely commercial self-enrichment. Not least, community-based service providers will be scrutinised to see if they adopt an altruistic dedication to grass-roots development or are bound in myopic individualism. The acid test is this question: 'Are we planting the seed today for tomorrow's growth or engaged in terminal short-term efforts?'

To show that bad service is a function of the human element and that neither Africa nor Europe is exempt from it, I will share with you two parallel true stories, which happened to two of my close family friends. Both incidents lie squarely in the medical profession across the two continents. The first story is about a lady friend who lived in Switzerland for four years with her husband and children in the early 1990s. She fell ill and was admitted to hospital where she was first diagnosed of one thing and then another, both of which turned out to be wrong. In the third week the illness was correctly diagnosed and she was operated upon without any real emotional preparation. The family were informed it would be a minor operation from which she would recover within a couple of days. In reality she languished in hospital for a further month because the operation had been done wrongly, giving rise to life-threatening complications. Immediately after being discharged, she flew back home, where doctors condemned the manner in which she was operated, indicating she had a prima facie case for suing the hospital for negligence. She now has a large unsightly permanent scar. No apology was extended and she vowed that she will never be treated in a European hospital again.

Another couple lived in South Africa while on an expatriate posting with an international firm. The wife went into maternity hospital to deliver her first child. An operation was performed which turned out to be unsuccessful because the abdominal cut would not heal. Instead of being out of hospital in three days, this became two weeks of agony. In the meantime, the nurse who was supposed to feed the infant did not do it, whilst the mother could not walk to go to the room where the baby was. Consequently, her husband had to come twice a day, including 01h00 in the morning, to feed his child. When he asked the nurse why she was not doing her duty, she retorted that was not part of her job. One could ask a barrage of questions such as: If tending the sick is not a nurse's job then what are they trained and employed to do? Couldn't sheer human compassion persuade her to help the woman in pain? While a nurse set her

own rules, where were the supervisors? Is there a shared vision and purpose for existence in this hospital?

In each case something technically wrong was done, but no one took the responsibility either to redress it or to apologise. This is a breach of the first cardinal rule of service excellence. Second, in neither case did the institution display an inherent culture of service orientation. Consequently, the staff were only doing a job to earn their salary with no passion for service. This breaches another cardinal rule, which advocates love for what one does. Third, each incident was a catastrophic moment of truth that influenced the attitude of each family negatively. Each family will recount the nightmare for years, thereby spreading a negative image of the country in general and the medical profession in particular. Thousands of highly professional and caring staff are being painted with the one negative brush.

BEYOND RENAISSANCE TO WORLD CLASS

There is no panacea but only a practical recipe for success in such circumstances as Africa finds itself. Let us enumerate the ten service commandments and put them into a framework of logic, which can assist those in search of excellence.

- **First:** *Build on the virtues of our Africanness, which were detailed in the first chapter, that is, the inherent unpretentious originality, warmth, communal helpfulness and genuineness. The Japanese emerged from the ashes of World War II into a world-class economic Goliath by building on their work ethic. For decades Western productivity gurus flocked to Japan to study their rise. It was that dedicated employment-for-life ethic that enabled the transformation of Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo from a relatively small company to the world giant called Sony today. Many others followed suit, adding to considerable customer satisfaction across the universe.*

- **Two:** Service standards are notably elevated in an environment where the spirit of nationhood and little or no ethnocentrism prevails. Tribal delineations and racial disharmony militate against service excellence as they prevent maximum tapping of the best talent in society. The fact that someone is related to you, comes from your neighbourhood, or is of the same racial origin does not make him or her the best performer in a position you may have at your disposal. In most African contexts the biggest scourges are nepotism, villagism, sexism, parochialism and aversion to diversity of approach. These are all arch-enemies of service excellence.
- **Three:** Adopting an international frame of reference for self-appraisal as opposed to accepting a second-best sub-optimal position. A dull student who comes first in a class of sub-standard peers does not become a genius. The human mind and society have a natural self-defence mechanism whereby when unsuccessful they look for a scapegoat by comparing themselves with one of lesser capability. We should benchmark ourselves against the best and not say: 'We are just Africans.' Some of the best holiday resorts in Africa are those where the local culture is totally entrenched in the service without any Western or foreign frills, where you are received in an African manner, into a place livened with African décor, entertained and fed in a typically African fashion. How should service excellence be measured under such circumstances? Only one way prevails – by the customers exclaiming: 'Wow, I never expected that.' Africans earn this every day, but the trumpet is not blown loud enough by those who judge collective performance.
- **Four:** Distinctive competence: What is it that we clearly excel in? Comparative advantage: What are we better endowed with than others? Africa has much to show in this regard. In the area of people, we have peace-loving, hardworking, enduring and emotionally rich people. For this reason they make excellent tour guides. In terms of natural resources we are to be envied by the world. Begin with our vast open sparsely populated land, rich vegetation and thick forests, the huge game reserves well stocked with

animals, the picturesque terrain, including world landmarks such as Mount Kilimanjaro, the Zambezi with Victoria Falls, the East African Great Lakes, and the Sahara desert.

All these features are great selling points for service experience for foreigners. It is our in-born hospitality that enables our visitors to experience the African jungles by night and day without fearing for their lives. That is a combination of distinctive competence and comparative advantage.

- **Five:** Our society should build on its propensity to consensus and team spirit to become a continually learning society. We need a value-adding education system which sharpens life skills more than solving abstract problems of the universe. A learning society believes in multi-directional change and discards precedent as the sole yardstick for right and wrong. Similarly, it seeks to benchmark its performance against the best and not the mediocre. More so, it has a shared vision and promotes team learning. Africans can score highly because they have the requisite emotional interdependence and sentimental identification with what is perceived as the intangible but omniscient and omnipotent force responsible for societal discipline and wisdom.
- **Six:** Political stability and peace: any form of service can only be dispensed in conditions of relative calmness. This makes stability of society a prerequisite for service excellence. An equally vital condition is less governance, which gives people the leeway for creativity and personal responsibility for own actions. The only fly in the African ointment is instability as evidenced by civil wars and autocratic governments. These give rise to a state of mental emergency that militates against customer care of any form.
- **Seven:** African culture must strike the delicate balance between communalism and positive individual competition. To be world class an inherent spirit of competitiveness must be embraced by all. Sadly, a rare concept of 'PhD' prevails among those frustrated by the stiff competition brought about by the present-day cut-throat conditions. That acronym does not stand for an academic doctorate degree at all. It means simply 'Pull him

or her down', which refers to frustrating the efforts of any colleague who appears to be exceeding the norm for success. That is reminiscent of communalism translated lock, stock and barrel from the traditional agrarian setting to the modern cash economy. Consequently, it militates against service excellence.

- **Eight:** Total quality commitment: service excellence is a direct corollary of the quality philosophy. Society and its constituent groups must have an extremely high work ethic and self-discipline, which will make it forego something of interest to ensure excellent service to others. Quality is an elusive phenomenon that is only recognised by recipients and compels them to repeatedly buy that service and not one offered by a competitor. We have seen how Japanese society rose to fame through their relentless quality-dominated work ethic. The African is the most resilient person to hard conditions, which breeds an extremely hard-working nature. The virtues of that high work ethic can be mobilised into a laudable quality-oriented service vehicle that will win us a place in the sun.
- **Nine:** Big and audacious societal goals. American society built its success around the 'American dream', which promises every member of society a high quality of life. This became a distinctive ethos that instilled the value system of a winning nation. That has been the rallying point for centuries, making it the world economic powerhouse. There are striking geopolitical similarities between the United States and Africa. The USA is a union of 51 states and Africa has a similar number of countries. That is why Kwame Nkrumah saw it was possible to create the United States of Africa as early as the 1960s. The fundamental difference lies in gross national wealth and per capita income. However, we have the necessary ingredients to transform into a winning continent. What will it take? Only a highly potent formula of ambition and determination to rise from the trenches of deprivation. There is an old African adage which says 'There is dignity in poverty' that seeks to show that it is always possible to turn around from poverty to dignity. We can do it.

Big, hairy, audacious goals (Bhags) stimulate progress by stretching the ability and capacity of people. The fact that one dares to tread where the devils fear makes one a visionary who sets compelling goals for oneself and others. Such tough and unimaginable goals have a clear finishing line. In addition, they serve as highly motivating. It's exciting to fight against Goliath and it's even more exciting to beat him. These big goals should transcend leadership and promote entrepreneurship. In so doing, the pursuit for Bhags reinforces the core ideology.

- **Ten:** From time telling to clock building. Quality and service demand that providers stay ahead of the game to retain a competitive edge. This requires a mindset of innovation and adventurousness. A time-telling society follows changes with no influence on the course of things. It watches things happen and sometimes wonders what happened. On the other hand, a clock-building society invests energy in building sustainable structures and processes to deliver excellence in the desired form. African society has already demonstrated its capacity to build clocks and help others to tell the correct time through the wonders of such monuments as the Egyptian pyramids, Great Zimbabwe, bushmen caves and paintings all over the continent which represented landmarks of historical progress. That competitive strategy can only grow from strength to strength.

Society must value change experimentation and constant improvement. It is necessary to make a shift in thinking as fundamental as that which preceded the Newtonian revolution. Prior to that revolution, people explained the world around them primarily in terms of a God that made specific decisions. This theory of causality is the basis of explanation of events in all ordinary African situations. In the 1600s people figured out that God put in place a universe with certain principles, relieving God of the burden of making all minute decisions. From then on people learned to look for the underlying dynamics of the universal system which caused things to happen as they do. That was the essence of the Newtonian revolution. This self-sustaining set of principles is the sole evidence of being in the clock-building mode.

QUEST FOR AFRICAN SERVICE RENEWAL

We have been at pains to describe the magnanimous nature of African leaders who sacrificed everything to gain freedom for the masses. This was captured so lucidly by Thabo Mbeki, who is today president of South Africa. In 1964, as a young man, he addressed the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid in London. He was echoing the voice of black Africans against persecution in general and appealing for the lives of those politicians found guilty of treason at the Rivonia trial in Johannesburg, among whom were his father and Nelson Mandela. Undeterred he spoke forcefully saying:

Though much has been said on this subject, I should also like to add my testimony about the character of the men that the South African government would have the world believe are criminals. They are not only men of the greatest integrity that responsibility to their families and friends would demand, men who would be welcomed by any civilised country, but also men who would grace any government in which they served. Activated by the noblest of motives, they have acquired through the years an understanding of leadership that would be a valuable contribution to the common human experience ... Today we might be but weak children, spurred on by nothing other than the fear and grief of losing our fathers. In time yet we shall learn to die both for ourselves and for the millions.

Undoubtedly this was the epitome of selfless service by leaders who were prepared to lay down their lives for the freedom of the masses. Today it would not be surprising to hear anyone who is told of this sacrifice exclaiming 'Wow, I did not expect them to do that.' That statement is synonymous with service excellence. A handful of people created a vision in the interest of the rest of the society and pursued it with passion. After the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, Thabo Mbeki became the

architect and chief protagonist of the quest for African Renaissance. To this end he made very strong assertions in 1998:

The time has come that we say enough and no more, and by acting to banish the shame remake ourselves as the midwives of the African Renaissance. An ill wind has blown me across the face of Africa. I have seen the poverty of Orlando East and the wealth of Morningside in Johannesburg. In Lusaka, I have seen the poor Kanyama township and the prosperous residence of Kabulonga. I have seen the African slums of Surulere in Lagos and the African opulence of Victoria Island. I have seen the faces of the poor in Mbare in Harare and the quiet wealth of Borrowdale. I have had the stories of how those who had access to power, or access to those who had access to power, of how they have robbed and pillaged and broken all laws and all ethical norms with great abandon to acquire wealth, all of them tied by an invisible thread which they hope would connect them to Morningside and Borrowdale and Victoria Island and Kabulonga ...

It is out of this pungent mixture of greed, dehumanising poverty, obscene wealth and endemic public and private corrupt practice that many of Africa's coups d'etat, civil wars and situations of instability are born and entrenched ...

The African Renaissance demands that we purge ourselves of the parasites and maintain a permanent vigilance against the danger of the entrenchment in African society of the rapacious stratum with its social morality according to which everything in society must be organised materially to benefit the few ...

Surely, there must be politicians and women activists, trade unionists, religious leaders, artists and professionals from Cape to Cairo, from Madagascar to Cape Verde, who are sufficiently enraged by Africa's condition in the world to want to join the mass crusade for Africa's renewal.

It is heartening to listen to such a prominent African leader advocating for a new service platform for Africans to define their own agenda to deliver service excellence across their continent. Future prosperity rests on the success of such ideologies being translated to common daily practice by the common person. Indeed Africa still has ample opportunity for a turnaround.

PULLING THE THREADS TOGETHER

The simple service excellence equation is as follows.

At any given time in a business transaction the level of actual service is greater than or equal to the perception of the recipient. It means the service provided must equal or exceed the perception of the recipient of the service. Business is all about people and not rocket science. It is about people as customers or consumers of services and products. It is also about people as staff and management creating and providing the service. Lastly, it is about people as suppliers of the hardware and raw material to craft the service or product to be given. Therefore, a fundamental principle of service excellence is to eliminate dissonance by promoting a common perception and vision of service among all three categories of people involved in the business transaction.

Close the service gap in every walk of life. This can be achieved through all sectors of organised society including private and public sectors, the political sphere and the professions committing themselves to the following steps:

- *Providing management training for deeper perception and open-mindedness in understanding situations*
- *Creating an environment conducive to service excellence through teamwork and quality-oriented productivity*
- *Empowering all staff through a supportive management style, a less structured climate and training to boost their service skills*

- *Instituting in-built self-audits for organisations to facilitate evaluation of their performance in regard to service provision.*

Encourage hypermetropia (long-sightedness) in all concerned with the distribution chain. Service providers need to have clearer knowledge of the outer world to fend off xenophobia. They should be able to see further than their noses in order to use objective benchmarks for comparison. They should have the courage to unravel tradition, break the mould and redefine the norms of service. Precedent must not be allowed to supplant new moves towards customer-oriented behaviour.

Chapter 8

Crystal ball into the new millennium

In conclusion let us discuss the relationship between service excellence and the mobilisation of a new African society to meet global competitiveness. This entails constructing a thumbnail sketch of the new beginning for this beloved continent. Let us attune our minds through the inspiring words of Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States of America as far back as 1899. 'Far better to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows not victory nor defeat!' These words exalt the virtues of embarking on big audacious goals whether as an individual or as a nation. Therefore, it requires significant changing in African society at various levels.

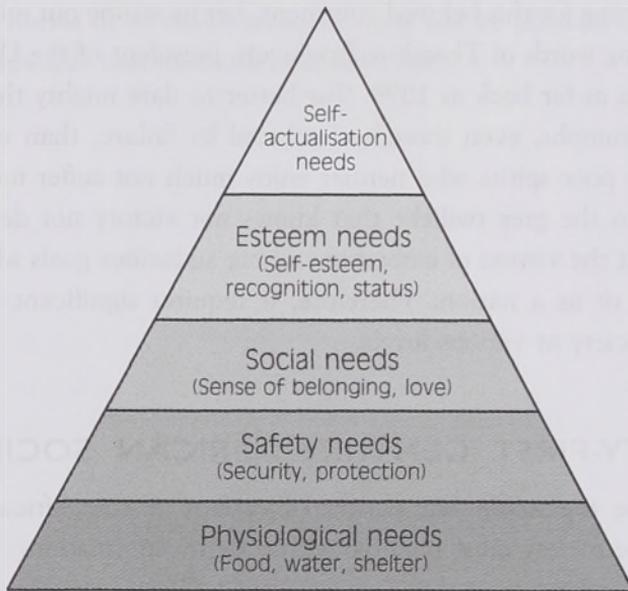
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICAN SOCIETY

To achieve the noble but elusive objectives of the African economic revival, the society must undergo wholesale transformation.

The most fundamental society upheaval will be in its value system. The future generation will have a higher level of self-esteem, which will motivate it to reach for much higher goals than those of the past. Such conjecture flows from the current thinking that the last century discovered human dignity of the underprivileged of the world and the twenty-first century will assert the place of the African in the determination of world affairs. To illustrate this elevation of the value system, a common model of human behavioural motivation will be discussed in relation to our society, namely Maslow's hierarchical theory of motivation. It sought to explain why people are driven by particular needs at certain times, which leads to

them valuing internally driven needs. A society is ruled by its value system, which implies that perception or experiencing of customer service satisfaction is largely determined by one's value system. Maslow's theory propagates that an individual, and collectively a society, has an ascending order of needs which primarily influence his or her behaviour. The ripple effect goes on until the highest level need is satisfied.

Graphically the pyramid of needs is represented in this form.



The simple interpretation of the five categories of needs is that when a person feels hungry or thirsty or needs shelter from inclement weather, he or she is preoccupied with satisfying that need. At that time the person is not concerned with such higher order needs as personal safety, or being loved or attaining a recognised status in the community or, finally, realising his or her highest potential in life. Only when the person's hunger is eliminated does he or she worry about personal safety and the pattern is repeated through all the need categories.

Let us now relate this to our contemporary African society. The overwhelming majority of indigenous African inhabitants are at the physiological and safety needs level on the Maslow hierarchy. This is because of several factors, including the widespread poverty brought about by lack of economic advancement, rampant wars, civil unrest and social displacement, famine caused by poor agrarian practices, as well as lack of farming implements. Consequently, most of our societies have chasms between a small elite and masses of poverty-stricken compatriots. Naturally this impacts seriously on the concept and practice of service excellence.

First, the majority living in poverty automatically become subservient to the small elite for survival. The elite internalise the tendency to exploit the defenceless masses because they have little or no bargaining power to demand decent levels of service. With time, bad service, including exploitation, becomes more of the rule than the exception. Eventually the entire society is maligned by this self-perpetuating evil.

Second, the small elite fail to see the need to comply with any decent norms of service because they define the rules and shift the goalposts as they deem beneficial to their interests. In this regard we often experience unethical business practices, exorbitant pricing structures and lack of sensitivity to market demands.

Third, in response to this apparent exploitation the poor masses tend to become persuaded to abrogate the rule of law and start by perpetrating petty crime to feed themselves. If this goes unchecked by redistribution of wealth or other social equity measures, society degenerates into anarchy. Thus, poor or lack of service excellence begets lawlessness if it is ignored for too long. There is an old axiom which says, 'The rich cannot sleep well at night if their neighbour is starving'.

Even more serious are the social and psychological consequences of constantly struggling to satisfy the first two levels of basic needs on the Maslow hierarchy. The core of the self-esteem and pride of the nation is hurt, forcing it into mediocre low achievement mode. Underachievers can

never become winners, whether as individuals or as collective society. The corollary is that losers do not serve well in any circumstances. The hypothesis is that twenty-first century society in African countries will be emancipated from economic deprivation, which in turn will enable it to satisfy social needs, then proceed to meet the self-esteem and finally the self-actualisation needs. Society will create and uphold a new value system driven by service excellence as the normal way of doing business. In short, tomorrow's African society will have a higher motivational level than its brow-beaten forerunners of today.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The logical point of departure is to ask a myriad of questions about African politics:

- *Is there going to be another Rwanda 1994 genocide anywhere else on the continent?*
- *Will political intolerance of rival political parties continue to be the hallmark of African politics?*
- *Will tribalism and ethnic orientation continue to dictate political conduct in African nations?*
- *Can racial exclusiveness defy the laws of nature and prevent total integration of races?*
- *Does open democracy have a chance in the African political scenario or will a modified version dominate the future?*
- *Will the rivalry among African nations give way to continentalism to face the world as a formidable alliance?*
- *Is there going to be a preference for peace in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, West Africa, the Equatorial Belt, East and Southern Africa?*
- *Is there going to be a successful, humane solution to the problem of 6 million refugees currently on our continent?*

These are daunting questions which should be uppermost in the minds of all Africans. The answers have a great deal of effect on service and the environment of delivery to the many citizens who expect continuous improvement in their lives. Here are my predictions for the African political scenario, and its impact on the millions of its customers.

First, an effect of the winds of change will be erosion of close-knit ethnical constellations in favour of mass national democracies. This will mean that all over the continent marginalised groups such as the coloureds and those of Indian origin will take their place squarely alongside indigenous Africans or, euphemistically, very black Africans. This will have far-reaching positive spin-offs as regards wealth creation and building the economy when these groupings completely feel that they are part of the African dynasty who must play their part in the renaissance and reconstruction process.

Second, an obvious direct result of the above developments will be the creation of a more acute sense of nationhood. Politics of exclusion were fashionable in the century just ended when national profiles were still overtly checkered with tribal, ethnic and racial polarisation. These will be of no major consequence in the new century because of a natural process of evolution of mankind, wisdom as well as political maturation dictated by new reality.

When I and all the black Africans of my generation and before grew up, separate development between races was the norm. As a result, each side of the colour line internalised the false reality that the other side was of no importance, except where it served an economic purpose as an employer or employee. As opportunities opened up because of political overhauls, this became a fallacy. In addition, social integration through housing, schooling, sharing of social amenities and business equality have enforced a new order. When I went to school, my only option was a black-only school and I only met other races at university. Ten years later my child attended a multi-racial kindergarten and school from day one. The definition of racism that I carry is totally different from the perception that

she and her contemporaries of other races have. Theirs is a level playing field that promotes the commonality of nationhood. To that effect, when they define standards of service, they do so through the same viewpoint to similar audience.

The third ingredient of a healthy political landscape will be professional leadership on the part of those entrusted with the affairs of the nation. The politics of yesteryear were symbolised by lack of service mentality, blatant exploitation of opponents, intolerance of opposite views and absence of transparency or accountability to those being served. Ethical behaviour was encountered more by accident than by design in most leadership. They should not be entirely blamed for they were responding to an environment which promoted such behaviour. To this day many political leaders are using their powerbase to advance business opportunities for themselves and their kindred.

Such crossovers tend to lead to conflict of interests, anti-trust and sometimes downright corruption. These slip-ups do not go unnoticed by the rank and file, who adopt them as the new mode of survival. The politician of the new century will either be young and well-off or old, mature and affluent from years of hard work. The two ends of the spectrum will be preferred because they will have the best chance of being content with politics alone and not cross over to the private business arena simultaneously.

Professional leadership skills will be the order of the day to be able to create and foster a vision, correctly decipher the political nuances at play, employ the correct decision logic despite insufficient information and be completely results-oriented. Thus, in the new century, political office will become an elected sign of achievement instead of being the dumping ground for mediocre party stalwarts. African politics will become more internationally oriented both for individual nations and for the consolidated continent. Africa will have to claim its rightful position as an international player and not remain in the second league of nations. This will be achieved mainly through three strategies. One will depend on

our capability to curb civil wars, unrests and factional rivalry. The second is dependent on demonstrated preference for peace across the continent. Intra-continental organisations such as OAU, SADC, ECOWAS, the Arabic African Countries League, PTA, East African Countries bloc will have to consistently sell the message of peace preference. Political players of the future will have the humility of servant leadership and thus will identify with their constituents as customers for life.

The third factor is the extent of economic progress to make Africa a force to be reckoned with on the global map. If African economies boom sufficiently to be able to feed their people, employ their economically active populations, provide adequate social security facilities and do not depend on borrowing from the IMF-World Bank Consortium, the world will look at Africa as a serious contributor to universal progress and not a millstone retarding international prosperity. This will require an incisively new look at the relationship of politics and business by political leaders of the future.

The new century will see an Africa which not only talks about world-class conduct but puts it into action. Technological advances will continue to speed up change and force it on us with a resultant major influence on our behaviour. Global competitiveness is primed up by the 20-40-40 formula at business enterprise or national level. It means 20 per cent of global competitiveness comes from the comparative advantage with which the nation is endowed. This could be agrarian based, minerals or any other resource. The next generator of competitiveness of 40 per cent comes from people skills and the last 40 per cent represents technological input. An earlier examination of various countries across the continent revealed an abundance of natural resources and the presence of hard-working people with the resolution to succeed. Therefore, the 20 and 40 components of the formula are already present to some extent. It is the last 40 per cent of technology which has to be built up to competitive levels. The new century will probably urge Africa to emulate post-war Japan and mount a strategy of copying technology within the confines of intellectual property

rights laws. This will boost the global competitiveness of the continent significantly. More so, it will heighten a greater sense of urgency in the people, which will improve service orientation all round.

One final prognosis for the political pattern of the next century. While we advocate for democracy and transparency to reign in the new millennium, we do not want the American type of ultra-openness which ends up being tantamount to seeking perfection in an imperfect world. Africa will need to define its own version of democracy which takes into account its special circumstances. It will need to be a special blend of the traditional benevolent dictatorship and Western transparency and accountability. Our society needs to be transformed, which demands turnaround leadership strategies. By its sheer nature, a turnaround sanctions some drastic tactics to mobilise action but simultaneously share the vision with those affected. It is such political action that will enable leaders to serve their customers (the electorate) in an effective manner, as the nature of the politics will create sufficient economic growth to lift the masses from the first two rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the more exalted level of motivation.

THE BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

In the new century business should undergo as significant a transformation as the political scenario. Following the principles of less government and more self-determination of society, the business sector will need to create sufficient wealth to sustain that philosophy. More than ever before, business enterprises will need to demonstrate and deliver consistent service excellence to a new range of customers with greater demands. I see more deliberate movement from village to global economies across the land. With more openness and interdependence there will eventually be a similar economic constellation to the European Union, perhaps with a synonym such as African Commonwealth. This will go a long way towards

standardising business conduct and, concomitantly, customer service across the vast region.

Of necessity, there will be more entrepreneurial leadership with a much younger age profile, driven by a less conservative investor public prepared to take risks which were previously taboo. The trend now commonplace in such industries as information technology and investment services of appointing 'yuppies' (young professionals) as executives is likely to gather momentum in the next few years. I also see a new stakeholder partnership taking root in many countries on the continent, as evidenced by such groupings as tripartite alliances of business, labour and government. In larger economies like South Africa there are considerable investments into business by trade union movements. This is a positive trend which helps bring labour stability and higher productivity in those enterprises as employees become more committed and cannot wantonly strike as it would be self-destructive.

In the horizon one can also see a decrease in social distance between boss and subordinate or employer and employee. This will be partly because of the new joint ownership of firms as discussed above and also the philosophy of joint problem solving. In some countries, again South Africa being a leading one, there are negotiated social plans between labour and employers that guide handling of business closure, retrenchment, re-skilling of employees and creation of self-employment opportunities.

The growth of smaller, informal businesses will lead to some positive developments as regards service orientation among players. First, such enterprises have the capacity to render personal service as opposed to following a standard manual in a large corporate. Second, they are compelled by business realities to be committed to total quality management and zero defect tolerance in order to attract and retain customers from large organisations. Third, it has been proved universally true that small organisations contribute more to employment creation than the big conglomerates. The most fundamental form of customer service in Africa

is employment, which raises the quality of life of the employed and the extended family who depend on the breadwinner.

There is also the realistic fact of business evolution, which will see management become more of a profession than before. The proliferation of management development facilities has brought professional guidelines within the reach of many. Another push factor is the intensity of competition, which will demand more operating efficiencies, above-average customer satisfaction, greater product innovation and a consistent strategic fit of the organisation to its environment. Those ill-equipped, intuitive managers who came up through the ranks will fall short of these challenges. In fact, management will give way to leadership even at lower echelons of the organisations. Leaders have graduated from precedent-based to futuristic and pragmatic practitioners who can revel in the African winds without losing either focus or the winning streak. Furthermore, the high breed of professional leaders will display unfettered creativity, symbolic of real clock building as opposed to just the time-telling orientation of their predecessors. Lastly, that generation of leadership will place emphasis on managing information to influence the environment towards the predominance of a service culture in society. I see a new definition of an African taking root in the new millennium. In the past the reflex understanding of the word was the indigenous black whose roots have lain in Africa since time immemorial. New realities have destroyed the rigid ethnic-based definition to embrace those of other orientations whose history goes back to the last two centuries. These include some white and Asiatic people. The coloured people are naturally as African as one can be, since they are a joint product of the indigenous and the latter African. This new reality is now manifested by political parties in many countries, being inclusive of all races, which was taboo before.

This will give the new century an advantage over the past as society will be able to exploit the strengths of a more comprehensive mixture of groups. If this chemistry of unity fails, then Africa is relegated to the

scrapheap because of a 'we and them' divisive racial polarisation. As a consequence, every customer in whatever form will receive only mediocre service.

LESSONS FROM THE EAST

After its defeat in World War II in the 1940s, Japan embarked on a systematic and complete national transformation. To give impetus to their economic renaissance the Japanese coupled their work ethic with good education. While in other nations young people went to North American and European universities for professional technical education and stayed there, those from Japan went back home on completion of their studies. Not only did they return with professional knowhow but also a technical propensity to improve the inventions initiated in the West. Thus they exploited the wisdom of copying success and avoided wasting resources by re-inventing the wheel. Consequently, Sony hatched the audacious goal of inventing the pocket-size transistor radio as a miniature of the large wireless model. Toyota, Mazda, Mitsubishi and other car manufacturers emerged and experienced exponential growth through understanding the emerging market customer needs and mass-producing highly durable utility vehicles at affordable prices. They also penetrated the American and other international markets. Fuji film became to Japan what Eastman Kodak was to America. Whereas in the 1950s the label 'made in Japan' carried a connotation of cheap quality, a decade later perception had shifted to seeing these products as representing quality workmanship, durability and reasonable prices. Thus, the Japanese became service heroes to a universal customer base by collectively being a learning society. Japan is one of the most populous nations in the world, yet it was possible to foster such a cult-like industrious culture. There are many lessons to be drawn from Japan that would facilitate the transformation of Africa. After all there is more commonality of cultural traits between Japanese and Africans than between African and eurocentric cultures. A few that come to mind are

the specific cultural role of women, sentimental adherence to greater beings of the past and congenital humility as manifested in their courtesy and etiquette.

THE UNTOLD STORIES ABOUT AFRICA

TENACITY OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN

We observed how the Japanese work an inordinately long day without coercion and noted their dedicated togetherness in inventing or perfecting things. The African is in exactly the same league in many ways. In particular, the African woman deserves special recognition. Let us start with the traditional woman of the past. In those days her place was in the home (not the kitchen only) where she was responsible for bearing and appropriately raising children. She had to till the fields with home-made implements. Her child-bearing started as early as 13 years in some societies and went on until curbed by the menopause. Consequently, the number of children was large because of the absence of birth control. Owing to the lack of scientific medical facilities, post-natal deaths of children and the mothers were extremely common. Often today, if you ask a granny how many children she had, the answer is in two parts: three or so many died, and the survivors are so many! Children were a fundamental social security for the parents, as they would look after them in their old age, so women were under untold psychological pressure to have as many children as possible, particularly boys. It is amazing how these women balanced these demands while men were hunting or fighting.

The woes of the African woman have continued in various forms. Those based in rural areas bear the brunt of the harshness of life. The men no longer go hunting, but they go to industrial centres and towns to look for work. In the southern African region, organisations such as Wenela and Theba serve as employment bureaux for the South African mining industry, recruiting from Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe,

Malawi and Botswana. Even outside this mining migration the predominant African way of life is that men work in towns and women stay in the rural areas to look after the home and wait for their men to come at weekends or even month-ends. This was caused by discriminatory laws that prohibited Africans from holding title deeds for property in the urban areas then designated as European land. When circumstances changed, the prices of properties rocketed, putting them out of reach of most of the population. In the face of all this, the African woman is still symbolised by carrying a baby on her back, a bundle of firewood on her head and a bucket of water in each hand, walking home from the fields at dusk to go and start cooking for her family. This image has transcended the boundaries of time and rural setting to the modern urbanite. It is not uncommon to find a professional African woman with a large house in an urban area cooking for her family and cleaning the house herself when she can afford to hire a helper. One might ask what causes this phenomenon. The answer is simply her inborn instinct to serve others with devotion and motherly concern. This personality trait is translated directly to the customer service arena in fashion boutiques in cities, department stores, agricultural produce market stalls, flea markets and handicraft stalls on the roadside. That is the epitome of service excellence in the African woman. Indeed it is tough and hard work, but she takes it in her stride as the hallmark of womanhood is to create, build and serve. With such winners this continent can only be a winner too.

TENACITY OF THE AFRICAN MAN

'Building the Cape to Cairo railway line'

When Cecil John Rhodes, the British mining magnate and imperialist, then resident in South Africa, dreamed of constructing a railway line from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa to Cairo in Egypt, he did not have any sophisticated machinery to do the work. Africa comprised wild virgin forests fraught with dangerous animals and crocodile-infested rivers. Yet he

dreamed of a railway link across that terrain without state-of-the-art equipment. How did he intend to tame these jungles? How did he plan to build the railway line? More importantly, why did he ever think of such a railway linkage?

The easiest answer is to advance British imperialism across the continent. This is only partly true, for Rhodes was a businessman, a speculative investor and not an avowed politician (although he practised politics in the Cape) before trekking northwards to establish the roots of the federated empire of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi respectively). Rhodes had noticed the virtues of highly industrious, faithful, obliging and helpful Africans who were a large future consumer and labour market.

Towards the turn of the nineteenth century the construction of the railway line started in South Africa and reached Zimbabwe in the early 1890s. The construction was essentially manual, undertaken by the bare hands of African men. It entailed clearing the forests, digging the parameters of the tracks, laying the heavy railway sleepers, building bridges across the rivers and carrying out all the other manual work required in construction. The labourers were of two types: those who volunteered to work for the meagre pay and conscripted labourers who would be paid a token amount at the end of the period.

This event had far-reaching social and psychological consequences. Because of the enormity of the job, absence of transport and non-existence of communication technology, these men went away from their homes for years and some never returned. Therefore, the fabric of family life was ripped apart with tragic results in some instances. My grandfather and his peer group played their part in building the railway line. The local language term then for conscription labour was 'Chibharo' (tantamount to rape) and many children born in that region were given that name by their mothers, who were left pregnant and delivered their children in the absence of husbands, who only saw them years later. This was a permanent reminder of the trauma experienced by the deserted mothers. On a

positive note, the venture helped to build a social and cultural bridge across numerous tribes in the Southern and Central African region. Men were drawn from as far afield as Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique to build the railway line. Some settled in South Africa and other countries, and some South Africans settled elsewhere and became assimilated into those cultures and tribes. Intermarriages ensued which cemented relations and played the useful function of reducing inter-tribal fighting to a large extent as instinct dictates that you can't kill your in-laws.

What is the moral theme connecting Cecil John Rhodes' adventure in Africa to customer service excellence? It is simply that whilst labour conscription partly coerced some men (who could easily escape), the majority participated without being subjected to force. Yes, there was the element of meagre monetary compensation, but the fundamental motivation lay in their inherent willingness to serve others. Indeed those forefathers must be remembered with gratitude by those who now enjoy the ride on the train from Cape Town through to Victoria Falls, Harare, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. When one takes time to understand the arduous conditions (climatic, social and security) under which the men toiled, only then does one appreciate that it was divine commitment to service and tenacity in harsh conditions that sustained them.

SYMBOLIC DIFFERENCE OF A NAME

Further significant evidence of the service orientation of the African lies in the myth of the name of Victoria Falls on the Zambezi river bordering Zimbabwe and Zambia. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, David Livingstone, a British explorer in central Africa, arrived among the Lozi people who live along the Zambezi river. He fell sick with malaria and the villagers nursed him (probably even treated him with African medicine) until he recovered. To satisfy his inquisitiveness they carried him on a makeshift stretcher on a long journey to show him *Mosi-oya-tunya* ('the

smoke that thunders'). Afterwards David Livingstone wrote to the queen of Britain advising her that he 'had discovered' the falls and named them Victoria Falls in her honour. Can you discern the vast contrast in humility and orientation towards others between the two parties? The Lozi people had lived with and known the falls for hundreds of years but had never named them Lozi Falls or any other name denoting possession or ethnic ownership. Instead they chose a neutral, descriptive name which had deep meaning as well as relevance for everyone. On the other hand, Livingstone set eyes on the falls under the guidance of the locals, but he had the temerity to claim discovery and even to name them after a queen who meant nothing to the Tonga villagers. Was it out of subservience and fear that the Lozis nursed him, fed him and ferried him to the falls? They had no obligation to this white man. Yet they assisted him in the true spirit of total service without demanding direct return payment. That is a classic example of service excellence at its highest level.

POWER OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE IN LIBERATION STRUGGLES

A number of African countries waged liberation wars to gain political freedom from their colonial masters. The practice gained momentum as the winds of political emancipation blew southwards through the continent. For example, in the first countries to become independent, mainly in West Africa, political change was achieved through negotiations which were sometimes precipitated by stone throwing and burning. By the time the movement came to Southern African countries like Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the modus operandi had escalated to fully fledged guerrilla warfare based mainly in rural areas with occasional spill-over to the urban centres. These struggles were protracted, yet the indigenous sides were not equipped with tankers, striker planes, communication and propaganda equipment. What sustained these resistance struggles for so long with so little supportive infrastructure?

The answer lies in the network of inherent service orientation of the African people across the continent. The countries up north that were liberated first rendered assistance to those still fighting in the south. This help embraced offering refuge to guerrillas and civilians, mobilising funds and international support for arms and training, as well as international propaganda to raise support for the cause.

The liberation war in Zimbabwe lasted nearly 16 years under circumstances of unequal power on the side of freedom fighters against well-equipped Rhodesian and South African forces. First, the African spirit of togetherness could not be broken by torture or any other affliction. Each person felt duty bound to serve and save his or her compatriot in whatever way possible. That made the eliciting of counter-intelligence information by the enemy very difficult, if not impossible. Quite often when the opposition soldiers arrived at a village to extort information about the movement of the 'terrorists' they would be directed in the opposite direction in such a well-coordinated manner that it sounded credible. Second, the freedom fighters were fed with the best food from village to village for years on end. The villagers slaughtered cattle at night then walked long distances to cook and feed the fighters. Third, young boys and girls were either assigned or volunteered to become assistants to the guerrillas to boost their morale and to serve as decoys in case of detection by enemy soldiers. Fourth, able-bodied young men or women often volunteered to join the guerrillas in response to the politicisation process. In some instances, a whole school would abandon studies and cross the border into Mozambique or Zambia to undergo military training. These youngsters would be guided, fed and concealed by different villagers on this long and dangerous journey, in a well-planned subterranean manoeuvre. Fifth, every working person in town and every business person who had roots in a particular area contributed either money or clothing every month through his or her village to support the fighters. In most cases these helpers were not affluent members of the society but they willingly gave time, limited cash and belongings in the spirit of total

service to one another for a noble cause. Through that service orientation little David conquered the gigantic Goliath. That is the same African spirit of service which liberated other nations such as Mozambique, Angola and lastly South Africa – indeed an amazing tale of faith in one noble vision of dignity as an African people.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We set out to explore the philosophy of service excellence and its ramifications in relation to the effective functioning of business enterprises, government, local communities, the public service, professional disciplines, the political arena and society at large. As we defined service excellence as that level of service which far exceeds the expectations of the recipient, it follows that the concept must have a deep-rooted origin. We observed that the essence of service excellence is truly ordained by God as sustained by one of the cardinal teachings of the Lord Jesus which says 'Do unto others what you would wish to be done unto you'. The logic of this commandment is that every normal person wishes the best for him- or herself. Therefore, people should extend the same level of best treatment to those they come into contact with. Service excellence precepts are predicated upon this divine discipline which is extrapolated to the fundamentals of the generic African culture and the commercial context in order to prove the close relationship. That is the gospel of this book.

HIGHLIGHTS OF EARLIER DISCUSSION

Service excellence is a pervasive element of humanity, which is inextricably intertwined with culture. For instance, the Eurocentric culture is oriented towards social service to the needy as manifested by the missionary work done around Africa in the past two centuries, the Rotary movement, and fostering or adopting a child in need of

parenthood. On the other hand, the afrocentric person is oriented towards service which has immediate results or gratification, which the eurocentric would probably ignore. This relates to helping his neighbour, supporting his extended family members, and upholding the values of the immediate environment. Service orientation is both a product and a result of culture.

Africa has some distinctive competences which give it a favourable disposition towards service excellence in many situations. Many of its constituent societies remain among those few in the world that can still perform miracles, societies which still exhibit a high level of spirituality actualised in the form of service to those in need. Example are the ancestral spirits and trances on the traditional side and the proliferation of the various sects of the Apostolic Faith whose prophets pray for the healing of the people in need. The continent has its firm comparative advantages such as the rain forests in equatorial Africa, the many big waterfalls, the pyramids of Egypt, the slave shipping points on the west African coast and the mysterious pools on top of mountains with mermaids. In most cases entry to these centres of attraction is free in the true service spirit of African togetherness.

Political stability and a measure of democracy are prerequisites for economic prosperity, which in turn influences service levels. The need for optimal economic performance of individuals, communities, societies and nations has a direct cause-effect relationship with service dispensation. An equation framework was mapped out in which the government should design an environment conducive to social growth and wealth creation; the private sector then becomes the impetus for priming the national economic engine; quasi-government institutions should safeguard dispensing of national essential services; and the informal sector should fill the service gaps created by corporate giants who cannot meet small customer needs that do not lend themselves to economies of scale benefits.

Now is the time for Africa to move out of the dependency syndrome into a self-sustenance mode. Even a Shakespearean motivation was invoked by citing that 'On such a full sea are we now afloat, / and we must

take the current while it serves ...' For this to be realised, a concoction of tactics are necessary, embracing an entrepreneurial spirit among all, global competitiveness, service acculturation at every stage of our lives, an international attitude, good governance and the emulation of success stories from our continent.

WAY FORWARD

Let us conclude by re-emphasising that service excellence is about eliciting the 'wow effect' from those who receive service beyond their expectations. The whole is greater than the total sum of its parts. Africans are naturally predisposed to teamwork through their culture of communalism, villagism and togetherness, which is so deeply anchored in the fabric of the society. That distinctive African feature should constitute the nexus of the African dream. The law of incrementalism is certainly in our favour, which enables the little that each person does towards service excellence to add to a greater aggregate contributed by a whole society. The dream should constitute the world class formula of thinking globally from the humble position derived from the distinctive competence of the African people.

LONG LIVE THE AFRICAN DREAM!

Concluding remarks Bibliographical notes

In this book I endeavoured to walk a journey with you, across as much of Africa as possible to provoke a new attitude about the great continent. We shared the positives and the negatives to strike a healthy balance of perception. My objective was to create a body of interesting observations which will build a new reality of customer service as a primer for a different societal approach on this continent. This objective will have been achieved if, after reading this book; a visitor to Africa becomes wiser, a student of management learns some few tips, an employee in any capacity gains a new service orientation and the business person of any size begins to challenge their established service habits. Despite the good, the bad and the ugly revealed herein, I still remain a proud and avowed African!

Thank you for sharing the excitement with me through your readership support.

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signposts

Signposts to Service Excellence The African Paradigm is a book designed to be entertaining but educational to a wide spectrum of both Afrocentric and Eurocentric societies. In an introspective style it traces the dynamics of African life which directly influence the business and socio-economic landscape of many African nations today. Based on personal experience of the author in many African countries, the book seeks to show that the philosophy of customer service is equally a prerequisite fundamental to success across all spheres of human endeavour.

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