Folklore for Managers, African Folktales to Inspire Managers

For more than 40 years, MDF Training and Consultancy has been providing management advice and training in Africa, Asia, Europe and beyond.

Improving the management skills and leadership qualities of our clients requires more than just technical skills and methods. Good management involves opening the heart and inspiring oneself and others. The folk stories in this booklet are rich in wit and wisdom. Trainers, facilitators, teachers, and lecturers can use these stories and the accompanying reflective questions to open people's hearts and minds to the valuable cultural lessons they hold. May these stories inspire managers in Africa and beyond.

MDF Africa is part of the worldwide operating MDF Training and Consultancy with offices in Bangladesh, Benin, Congo, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands and Myanmar.

Our mission is about empowering people, creating impact.
Find more information about who we are and what we do
on www.mdf.nl

This edition was published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of MDF Training & Consultancy and is not for sale.
Design by Marja van Lieshout, Valisz.nl

Folklore for Managers

A Collection of Folk Stories from Africa to Inspire Managers

Collected and edited by Susanne van Lieshout



'Good leadership comes from the heart and considers the hearts of others' *Jerry C. Wofford*

Jerry C. Wofford is known for his work on leadership and organizational behavior, emphasizing the importance of empathy and compassion in effective leadership.

Folklore for Managers

A Collection of Folk Stories from Africa to Inspire Managers

This booklet was published by MDF ESA (Kenya) in June 2024, on the occasion of MDF's 40th anniversary. The publication can not be sold, nor can it be reprinted without permission trom MDF ESA. The stories and questions can be used and retold by trainers, workshop facilitators, teachers, lecturers or anyone who wishes to use their wisdom to inspire people.

Acknowledgements

The editor wishes to thank valuable contributions to the management links by AG. Furthermore, thank you to Lisa Amenya for her editorial support and to MDF Africa's branch directors for their inputs. Last but not least, a big thank you to MDF Africa's clients and trainees from the African region for being a source of inspiration.

This publication contains folk tales from Benin, Cameroon, Congo DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. Some of the stories have been adapted by the editor. The management links expressed in the book are used in the management advisory and training sessions of MDF globally.

A Collection of Folk stories from Africa

Adea, the Teacher (Tanzania) 6
Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom (Ghana) 9
Miobe the Fearsome Boy (Ethiopia) 12
Rabbit's Tug of War (Malawi) 15
Take Advice from a Madman (Uganda) 18
The Centipede and the Spider (Cameroon) 21
The Crab Gang (Mozambique)§ 24
The Cursed King (Benin) 27
The Great Kingdom (Mali) 30
The Magic Tree (Congo) 33
The Man Who Never Lied (African folk story) 36
The Millet Stalk (Rwanda) 39
The Mother (South Sudan) 42
The Soap Maker and Her Four Daughters (Kenya) 45
Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky (Nigeria) 48

Akwaaba, Jambo, Welcome, Bienvenue!

It is my pleasure to introduce you to this booklet. As MDF Training and Consultancy celebrates its 40th anniversary, we are reminded of the principles that have guided our journey from a single office to a global presence. This milestone offers us a moment to reflect on the timeless wisdom that continues to shape effective management and leadership.

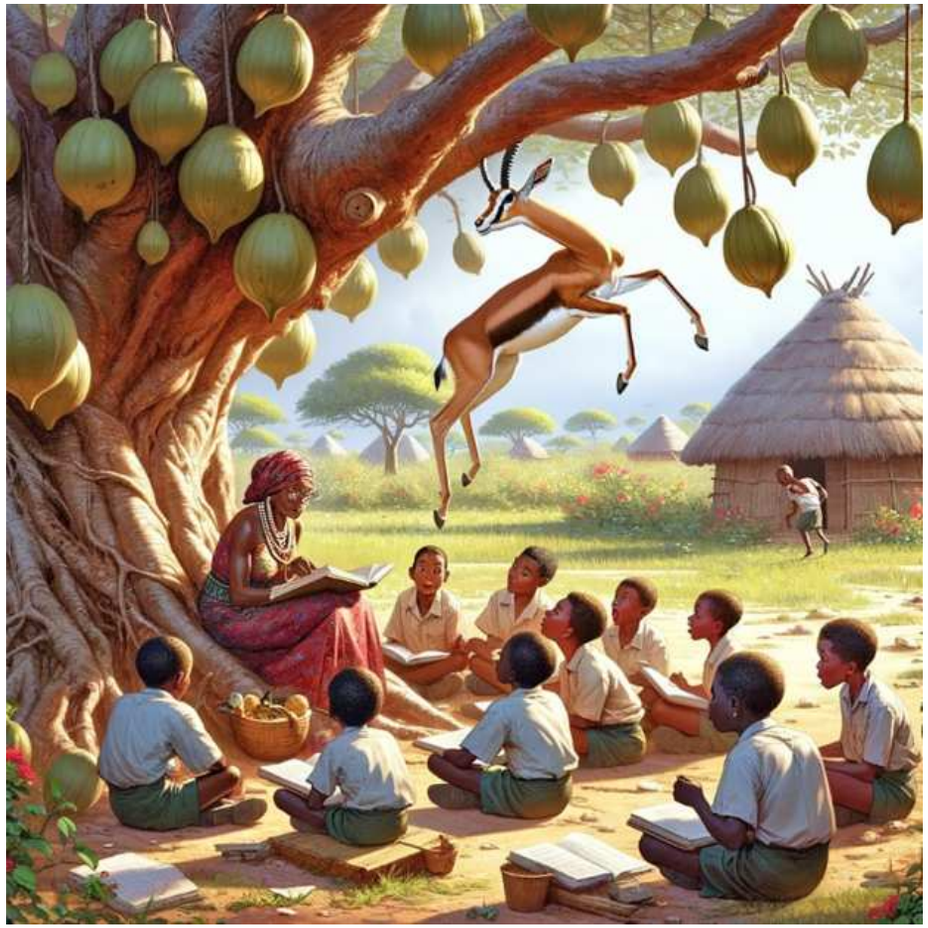
This book you hold in your hands, a compilation of ancient management advice from Africa, underscores a profound truth: the core of successful management has always been about people. Regardless of the era or the technological advancements, the essence of leading and inspiring individuals remains unchanged. These ancient teachings offer valuable insights that are remarkably applicable to the complexities of our modern world. They give us fresh perspectives on leadership, strategy, and organizational dynamics, reminding us that empathy, integrity, and the ability to inspire and motivate people are the bedrock of effective management.

As you explore the ancient African wisdom within these pages, we hope you find inspiration.

Thank you for being a part of MDF's journey. We look forward to continuing our mission of empowering leaders and fostering growth across the globe, guided by the wisdom of the ages and the spirit of innovation.

Happy reading,
Richard Yeboah
Regional Director MDF Africa

Tanzania



Adea was a respected teacher who taught children to read under a calabash tree. One afternoon, while she was deeply engrossed in giving a lesson, a gazelle named Paa climbed the tree to steal fruit. While in the tree, Paa shook a calabash loose, and it fell, striking Adea on the head and killing her instantly.

The grief-stricken students were devastated to find their beloved teacher dead. They gave Adea a respectful burial and vowed to find the one responsible for her death. After much discussion, they concluded that the south wind was the culprit who had knocked the calabash down. They caught the south wind and began to beat it.

The wind protested, 'Why are you beating me? I am just the wind! If I were that powerful, would I be stopped by a mud wall?' Realizing their mistake, the students turned to the mud wall, beating it next. The mud wall cried out, 'Why? I did nothing wrong!'

The wall then blamed Panya, the rat, for boring holes through it. The students found and beat the rat, which exclaimed, 'Why are you beating me? I am just a rat!' The rat pointed to Paka, the cat who hunted it.

When the students confronted Paka, she protested her innocence and blamed the rope for tying it down. The rope, in turn, blamed the knife, which cut it. The knife shifted the blame to Moto, the fire which burned it. But in turn, the fire pointed to Maji, the water, which put it out. The water blamed Ng'ombay, the ox which drank it. The ox blamed the fly, which tormented it. Finally, the fly blamed Paa, the gazelle.

The students found Paa and demanded an explanation. Struck dumb with guilt and fear, Paa couldn't defend itself. Realizing that Paa's actions had indeed caused the death of their teacher, the students avenged Adea by killing the gazelle.

Reflection questions

1. Why did the students initially blame the south wind for teacher Adea's death?
2. How did each character (like the mud wall, the rat, the cat, etc.) respond when blamed for the teacher's death?
3. Was the students' journey to find the truth and the culprit right or wrong?
4. Have you ever made a wrong assumption about someone or jumped to a wrong conclusion?

Management link

In management, leaders must create a culture of accountability where team members take responsibility for their actions and consequences. We must avoid 'Who did it' becoming more important than 'Why it happened'.

Good leaders foster a culture where individuals and teams own their outcomes rather than shifting blame. In the story, this is taken to a funny extreme. Still, each character's defense shows how easy it is to make wrong assumptions: the pitfalls of jumping to conclusions without sufficient evidence. At the same time, managers are not relieved of their responsibilities when delegating tasks. They are ultimately responsible for all actions under their supervision.

Topics

Accountability, owning actions and responsibilities, decision making, delegation

Long ago, the people on our planet had little knowledge and skills. They did not know about farming, tools, or weaving cloth. All the wisdom in the world was stored up in a clay pot kept by Nyame, the God of Heaven. One day, Nyame gave a special gift to Anansi, the clever and cunning spider, entrusting him with the pot of wisdom.

When Anansi received the pot, he was thrilled beyond belief. Every time he looked inside, he learned something new. However, his excitement quickly turned into greed. Anansi decided to keep the pot hidden from the world, not wanting to share its wisdom.

To hide the pot, Anansi tied a rope around his waist and began to climb a tall tree. But as he climbed, he found it difficult to manoeuvre with the pot hanging in front of him. While Anansi struggled, his young spider son saw his father's predicament: 'Father, why don't you tie the pot to your back? It will be easier to climb that way.' Anansi realized his son was right. Feeling embarrassed but determined to succeed, he tied the pot to his back and found that climbing the tree became much easier.

But then he stopped and thought, I am supposed to be the one with all the wisdom, and here is my kid smarter than me! In a rage, he hurled the clay pot down from the tree. The pot shattered into countless pieces upon hitting the ground.

As the pot broke, all the wisdom escaped and dispersed into the world. The knowledge flew far and wide, reaching every corner of the planet. People everywhere began to learn and understand new things. They learned how to farm, make clothes, craft tools from iron, and many other skills that improved their lives.



Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom / Ghana

Reflection questions

1. How might our planet be different if Anansi had successfully kept all the wisdom to himself?
2. How did Anansi's son's advice change the outcome of the story?
3. What does the story suggest about the importance of sharing knowledge?
4. Have you ever tended to keep knowledge for yourself? Why?

Management link

The story of Anansi, and there are many Anansi stories, is about sharing knowledge. It shows that knowledge is most valuable when it is shared. Knowledge sharing occurs through regular meetings, mentorship, joint assignments and training.
A manager once asked: Why we spend so much money training our people. Because what happens when they leave? A leader answered: Think about what will happen if we don't train them, and they will stay! Knowledge expands on sharing; it allows people to combine their insights, learn from each other, and build on existing information. Collaborative learning processes are ultimately what drives innovation and growth.

Topics

Knowledge sharing, collaborative learning, training, innovation

Ethiopia



Once upon a time, in an Ethiopian village, there lived a boy who was terribly shy and fearful of the world around him. His family called him Miobe, the frightened one. ‘Why do you call me that?’ the boy asked his grandfather. The old man laughed and responded, ‘Because you are always afraid.’

He pondered these words and decided he must find a way to conquer fear. That night, he packed a sack and set off to find out what he feared, intending to conquer it. As he slept under the broad umbrella of the sky, he whispered to himself, ‘I see you, but I will conquer you, fear’. The next day, he arrived at an unknown village. He got scared and thought, I don't know these people. They might be unkind to a stranger…

But he straightened up and walked over to meet the village elders. ‘I'm travelling the world to become brave,’ he said. The elders laughed. ‘You fool! Our village is being threatened by a monster on the mountain that appears every time the moon is full. See? It has the head of a crocodile, and its claws are horrible and sharp.

Indeed, Miobe saw the monster: the smoke, fire, wrinkled skin, and fiery eyes. Everywhere, people cowered. Children stayed indoors, and farmers did not tend their crops. The village was cursed; everyone feared the monster would come down to get them.

Miobe decided it was up to him to face the monster. He took a deep breath and began to climb. As he looked up, the monster seemed to be growing smaller. The closer he got, the smaller it looked. With the dagger from his sack in his hand, he gasped in disbelief: the monster had disappeared!

Suddenly, he heard a sound at his feet. He looked down and saw a little toad-like creature. He cradled it in his hand as he walked down the mountain. When he reached the village, the people cried in disbelief. Miobe handed them the wrinkled toad. ‘Here is your monster,’ he said.
The creature croaked, and the elder looked up at the crowd and said: ‘Miobe has brought us the monster. Its name is… fear’.

Reflection questions

1. How did Miobe's perception of the monster change as he got closer to it, and what does this suggest about the nature of fear?
2. How did the villagers' reaction to the toad reflect their understanding of fear?
3. What fears have you faced in your own life, and how did you overcome them?

Management link

The story illustrates how excessive fear and overthinking can prevent action. It reflects how individuals and organizations sometimes become immobilized by endlessly analysing problems. Miobi's decision to confront the monster directly, discovering it to be a harmless toad, underscores the importance of taking action to gain clarity and to simplify perceived challenges.

Imagined fear of undesired results causes decision-making paralysis. Effective leadership involves overcoming the paralysis of analysis by taking decisive actions.

Topics

Decision-making, decisive leadership, perception versus reality

Malawi

Once upon a time, in the lush landscapes of Malawi, a clever Rabbit approached the mighty Elephant, who was resting under a tall baobab tree. 'I challenge you to a tug-of-war,' Rabbit declared with a glint of mischief in his eyes. Amused by the tiny creature's boldness, Elephant agreed to the wager. 'If you can't pull me, you'll have to pay me,' Rabbit stipulated. Confident in his unmatched strength, Elephant readily accepted the terms.

Rabbit, with a well-thought-out plan, tied one end of a sturdy rope around the Elephant's trunk and instructed him to wait for the sound of a horn before pulling. With his strategy in place, Rabbit scampered off to the riverbank, where Hippo was approaching the cool waters. He presented the same challenge to Hippo, who also found the proposition entertaining and agreed. Rabbit tied the other end of the rope around Hippo, making sure both ends were secure.

Returning to a hidden spot between the two giants, Rabbit took a deep breath and blew a loud, resonant horn. Elephant and Hippo began to pull with all their might, each convinced they were competing against the deceptively strong Rabbit. Both were astonished at the incredible strength of their opponent.

Exhausted, Elephant and Hippo finally gave up, unable to pull any further. Triumphant, Rabbit hopped away with full pockets from collecting both bets, proving beyond doubt that wit and strategy could outsmart even the strongest of foes.



Reflection questions

1. What qualities did Rabbit use to outsmart Elephant and Hippo?
2. Have you ever outsmarted anyone who was seemingly stronger than you?
3. How could Elephant and Hippo have avoided being tricked?
4. Do you believe that taking risks, as Rabbit did, is necessary for achieving success?

Management link

This story is about risk-taking. Rabbit took a calculated risk by challenging two much stronger opponents and leveraging their strengths against each other. This highlights the role of smart risk-taking in leadership. Effective leaders have to take risks when necessary, but they need to do so with careful consideration of potential outcomes. That sometimes requires resourcefulness and out-of-the box thinking. This balance between risk and caution can lead to significant achievements and innovations.

Topics

Strategic thinking, risk taking, resourcefulness

Uganda



A very long time ago, there was a king in Uganda who was very cruel to his people. They feared him very much. Every day, he thought of new things that would distress them. No one was happy in the beautiful country, although the sun shone daily and the birds sang.

One day, the king summoned Walukaga, the chief of the blacksmiths. He said to him, 'You are a clever man. I want you to make a man at your forge, not an iron man, but a real one with flesh and blood who can walk, talk, and do everything that a real man does.'

Walukaga bowed and went away very sad. He knew that the king would kill him if he didn't obey. But only God can make a real man, and what blacksmith can create one at a forge? As he went home, he met a madman who greeted him with great joy. The sad blacksmith explained his fate: 'I have very few days to live,' and he told his story.

'Do you want my advice?' the madman asked. 'Why on earth would I listen to a crazy person,' Walukaga thought, but he let the madman talk anyway. The madman gave him advice, and both of them went home. Walukaga then went back to the king for an audience. When the king saw him, he laughed and said, 'Have you made the man yet at your forge?'

Then Walukaga bravely said, 'Sir, I ask for your help because this task is very difficult. I need a special material made of burnt human hair, and I want twenty large sacks.

The king sent messengers throughout the country, ordering the people to shave their heads. But when it was burnt, there was not enough to make the statue. So Walukaga went again to the king to ask for water, but not ordinary water. 'They must be tears of men and women, for it takes many tears to make one human life. I want three water pots full.'

Again, the king's messengers ordered all men and women to keep their tears. But although the land was full of sorrow and the people wept every day, there were only enough tears to fill one water pot.

Walukaga went back to the king and knelt before him: 'Sir, you set me a hard task to do, and I asked you to help me in an easy way. If a great king cannot do a small thing, how shall a poor blacksmith do the work of the Creator?' The cruel king realized that the thing he asked was impossible. So he gave him a present and sent him away.

Nowadays, in Uganda, when a person is perplexed and does not know what to do, his friends say: 'Find a madman and ask his advice!'

Reflection questions

1. What may happen if you ask your staff for something very difficult or impossible?
2. Why did Walukaga decide to ask and follow the advice of the man mad?
3. Can good advice come from anyone?
4. How did the King's attitude change at the end, and why?

Management link

The story is about setting realistic expectations and achievable goals for team members. Good leaders understand their team's capabilities and set challenging yet attainable tasks. Managers need to enable people with skills and resources to achieve these goals, which avoids frustration and demotivation.
The story also explains the importance of valuing inputs from all levels. Sometimes, valuable insights can come from unexpected places. Effective leaders listen to feedback and ideas from all team members, regardless of their position or background.

Topics

Expectation and target setting, learning from mistakes, empathy

Cameroon

In a lush, vibrant forest in Cameroon, a spider and a centipede were the best of friends. They spent many afternoons together, exploring and sharing their observations about the world. One day, they found themselves cozily seated on the branch of a mango tree. With his hundred legs gracefully dangling from the branch, the centipede turned to his friend and said, 'Did you know, my buddy, that all humans are deaf?'

The spider, busy repairing a small tear in his web, looked at the centipede with surprise. 'Deaf? What do you mean?' 'Yes,' replied the centipede, 'when I am walking with my thousand feet, they can only hear one.' 'Really?' asked the spider, pausing his work. 'I did not know that. But I do know that all humans are blind! When I make a new home by spinning my web, people just walk through it without noticing.'

The centipede nodded in agreement, his antennae twitching thoughtfully. 'Humans are indeed strange creatures. They don't use their bodies to the best of their abilities. They don't know how to scan their environment properly. They miss so much of the beauty and wonder around them.'

The spider sighed, 'Yes, they don't seem to appreciate the sun and the rain shower either. They hide under their silly hats and funny umbrellas, missing the simple joys of nature.'

And so, the two friends continued their discussion, each sharing more examples of the peculiar behaviours of humans. They laughed together, finding humor in the way humans lived their lives. They knew that despite their small size, they had a big perspective on life - one that humans might never fully comprehend.



The Centipede and the Spider / Cameroon

Reflection questions

1. In what ways can humans be blind and deaf?
2. What are other peculiar behaviours of humans seen through the eyes of animals?
3. How do humans and insects experience and appreciate nature differently?
4. The story teaches us to be more mindful and appreciative of our environment. How does this apply to management?

Management link

This story is about mindfulness in leadership. Managers who practice mindfulness can better respond to challenges calmly and thoughtfully, support their employees effectively, and create a positive work environment. Modern managers realize that everyone in the organisation has a view, irrespective of their position in the hierarchy, and they should listen to all, not just those close to them.

Also, to make your work environment more in sync with nature, use natural light and ventilation. Buy some indoor plants; natural elements in a workplace create a calming atmosphere. Encourage outdoor breaks and meetings in green spaces to foster a connection with the natural environment and for overall well-being.

Topics

Mindfulness, listening, greening environment, sustainability

Mozambique



Once upon a time, in a coastal village in Mozambique, a gang of crabs lived in a colorful coral reef. Like many crab species, they live in small groups. This helps them benefit from the complex corridors and crevices of the reef ecosystem, where they hide and feed.

One day, the adventurous young crab named Fari discovered a cove full of delicious seaweed. Excited, he convinced the other crabs to focus their efforts on harvesting this seaweed to the neglect of other food sources, promising wealth and abundance.

An old, wise hermit crab observed the process with skepticism. But he was shushed away each time he approached the gang to warn them. Ignoring the hermit crab, the others put their efforts into harvesting the seaweed. For a while, they thrived.

Then, one day, a powerful storm struck, destroying the cove and sweeping away the seaweed. The crabs found themselves desperate and hungry. Realizing their mistake, the crabs turned to the hermit crab for guidance. He reminded them that greed and lust for wealth had made them blind. 'You are omnivores', he said, 'you should not deny your true nature' as he withdrew into his shell, his solitary dwelling.

The crabs understood the hermit crab's nature and began gathering a variety of foods, including algae, plankton, small fish, plant material, and sponges.

This is how crabs became omnivores and opportunistic feeders. Their diet is primarily influenced by whatever is available in their environment.

Reflection questions

1. How can we apply the crabs' lesson about diverse diets to our decision-making?
2. What does the story suggest about the balance between ambition and caution?
3. How did the crabs' understanding of their true nature help them thrive?

Management link

This story from the beach in Mozambique stresses the importance of having diverse strategies. It highlights the dangers of relying too much on one particular strategy or resource. It's wise to spread risk across different products, clients, revenue streams, suppliers, and investors. This will help adapt to economic fluctuations and unforeseen challenges.

Smart managers, to stay competitive, develop a mix of products, explore various markets, and create multiple income sources. The Pareto 80-20 principle tells us that 80% of outputs (or income) are generated by only 20% of effort. This implies, for example, that 20% of clients generate 80% of business. So while diversification is good, it also means that we must pay extra attention to our larger clients, and not to spread ourselves too thin by trying to do too many different things. It's all about balance.

Topics

Product, market and income diversification, strategic leadership, Pareto principle

Benin

Once upon a time, there lived a powerful king named Ogisu, the King of the Sky. Despite his power, he was cursed. The cry of a baby would never be heard in his palace. To break the curse, he married seven wives, but none could bear him a child. Troubled, he offered sacrifices to the gods, who decided they would bless him with one child, but … only the wife with the purest heart could conceive.

Following the gods' instructions, all the wives left the palace to give birth. The last wife, an orphan, was homeless and wandered endlessly through the forest until she met an older woman who took her in. After giving birth, her baby was snatched away, and she searched for years to find him. Meanwhile, the other wives also gave birth: the first to a goat, the second to a chicken, the third delivered a cat, the fourth a lizard, the fifth wife got a tortoise, and the sixth gave birth to a rabbit. The king and the entire palace were in shock!

Years passed, and the lost little prince was never found. The grieving mother returned to the palace empty-handed. The king asked the wives to present their children, and they showed their animal babies. The last wife, unable to present her child, was not believed and lived as an outcast.

Years later, a boy's singing was heard from the river near the palace. The River Goddess, who had saved him, brought him to the palace. Each wife claimed him as her son. The chief priest ordered them to cook a meal for the boy to identify his birth mother. The first six wives bought expensive ingredients and prepared elaborate meals. The seventh wife, however, had no money and made Omi Ukpoka, a simple soup from leftovers.

The boy rejected all the meals from the first six wives but ate the soup made by the seventh wife, recognizing her as his mother. The king embraced her, asked for forgiveness, and crowned their son the prince. And so, the seventh wife, proven to have the purest heart, became the beloved new queen.



The Cursed King / Benin

Reflection questions

1. Why could the seventh wife have a baby when the others couldn't?
2. How did the boy recognize the meal from his true mother?
3. What did the king learn from the seventh wife and her son?

Management link

This story highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the qualities and contributions of all team members, regardless of their appearance or background. Despite being poor and orphaned, the seventh wife had the purest heart.
Many workplaces these days have intercultural, intergenerational, and multi-gendered teams. Leaders and colleagues should judge each other based on skills, competencies, and contributions, not on age, gender, or cultural background. Authentic leaders strive to be self-aware and reflective, which helps them recognize this and address their unconscious biases. Leaders who are true to themselves can lead with honesty and ethical values.

Topics

Valuing true qualities, integrity and authentic leadership, unconscious bias

Mali



Long ago, in the great kingdom of Mali, there lived a king named Maghan Kon Fatta. He ruled the land with wisdom and courage. One day, a seer predicted that the king would have a son who would become a great ruler and unite and expand the Mali Empire. This son would be named Sundiata.

Maghan Kon Fatta had many wives, but his second wife, Sogolon, gave him an extraordinary son. When Sundiata was born, he was weak and could not walk. The other women at the court mocked His mother and him.

Despite his physical weakness, Sundiata grew up to be an intelligent and determined young man. His mother encouraged him and constantly reminded him of the prophecy. One day, when he was seven years old, Sundiata decided it was time to fulfil his destiny. With great effort and determination, he stood up and walked for the first time.
His determination and growing strength caught the attention of many people, but they also made enemies. When his father, the King, died, Sundiata and his mother were banished from the kingdom. They wandered through various kingdoms, and Sundiata learned much from the people he met.

During this time, another powerful sorcerer-king, Soumaoro Kanté, began to threaten the land. He was cruel and oppressed many people. The people remembered the prophecy about Sundiata and begged him to return and save them.

Sundiata gathered an army of allies and rose against Soumaoro Kanté. In a decisive battle, using magic and his strategic brilliance, Sundiata defeated the tyrant and freed the land. He was crowned Mansa (king) of Mali.

The legend of Sundiata Keita is not just a fairy tale but an important part of the history and cultural heritage of Mali and West Africa.

Reflection questions

1. How did Sundiata's early struggles and the support from his mother shape his character and leadership abilities?
2. Did Sundiata's exile contribute to his growth and success as a leader? How?
3. Have you ever had to overcome hardship or challenges? How did it change you?

Management link

This story is about dealing with setbacks and challenges. Perseverance is known to be one of the success factors of effective leaders. This tale shows how important it is to keep going, even when things are tough. Managers can break down challenges into smaller problems and focus on finding solutions. They should also seek support from their team to tackle problems together. When Sundiata took a long break from the palace, he learned a lot. Taking a break allows managers to clear their minds, reduce stress, and approach the challenge with renewed energy. It is often helpful to take a step back and sleep on it to gain a different perspective and reassess the situation.

Topics

Perseverance, determination, problem solving

Once upon a time, in a village in the Congo, there were twin boys named Mavungu and Luemba. They were very different. Luemba was strong and handsome, while Mavungu was weak and homely. Mavungu was neglected by his mother, who clearly favoured the good-looking Luemba.

Feeling unloved and seeking a better life, Mavungu left his village. He wandered into the dense forest, unsure of what he would find. One day, he came across a vast, mysterious tree. Its branches seemed to touch the sky, and its leaves shimmered in the sunlight. It was so large that Mavungu could not pass. When he ruffled the leaves, he heard a voice. Mavungu was astonished. As he touched more leaves, each leaf became a person. Then, a beautiful lady appeared from the heart of the tree. She was a princess.

She thanked him for releasing her people from the tree. In return, she wanted to marry him. But she thought twice. He looked so homely and dressed in rags. But a promise is a promise, she thought, and so they married. There was only one condition: Mavungu could never reveal the secret about the magic tree to anyone.

The wedding was blissful, and they started a beautiful village. It thrived and prospered. Years later, though, Mavungu wondered about his twin brother and mother. He set out to find them in his old village. When they saw Mavungu, they screamed in happiness and disbelief: 'My son, my brother, how have you become so wealthy and fat?'

At first, Mavungu was reluctant to share, remembering his pledge. But his mother insisted: 'You left me long ago, tell me about your new life.'



She demanded he talk. Many moons later, Mavungu cracked. He forgot about his loved ones at home and explained his fortune story about the magic tree to those who did not love him. The consequences in his beautiful village were devastating.
Even today, the people of Congo ask: Why did Mavungu forget those who loved him? And why, in the end, did he honour the wishes and demands of those who did not love him?

Reflection questions

1. Why do you think Mavungu chose to reveal the secret of the magic tree to his mother and brother despite knowing the consequences?
2. What could Mavungu have done differently to honour his commitment to his new family while dealing with his old family?
3. Have you ever experienced conflicting loyalties or felt torn between competing obligations? What happened?

Management link

Personal relationships can heavily influence decisions. This is true not only for managers but also for employees. Leaders often need to balance competing obligations and interests. It is good to weigh the long-term effects of our decisions and to consider their broader impact. At the same time, we must realize that employees also have family obligations and conflicting priorities. They, too, can make decisions not for the collective good but out of emotional pressure. Hence, the story also underscores the importance of safeguarding our trade secrets and intellectual property with the utmost care.

Topics

Decision-making, loyalty, balancing conflicting interests

African Folktale



Once upon a time, there lived a wise man named Mamad. He never lied. All the people in the land, even the ones who lived twenty days away, knew about him. The king heard about Mamad and ordered his subjects to bring Mamad to the palace. He looked at the wise man and asked: 'Mamad, is it true that you have never lied? And you will never lie in your life?'

'It's true, I'm sure about that.'

Several days later, the king was about to go hunting. There was a big crowd. The king held his horse by the mane; his left foot was already on the stirrup. Then he ordered Mamad: 'Go to my summer palace and tell the queen I will be with her for lunch. Tell her to prepare a big feast. You will have lunch with me then.' Mamad bowed and went to the queen.

Then the king laughed and said: 'We won't go hunting, and now Mamad will lie to the queen. Tomorrow, we will laugh on his behalf.' But the wise Mamad went to the palace and said: 'Maybe you should prepare a big feast for lunch tomorrow, and maybe you shouldn't. Maybe the king will come by noon, and maybe he won't.'

'Tell me, will he come or won't he?' - asked the queen. 'I don't know whether he put his right foot on the stirrup or put his left foot on the ground after I left.' Everybody waited for the king. The next day, he said to the queen: 'The wise Mamad, who never lies, lied to you yesterday.' But the queen told him about Mamad's words. And the king realized that the wise man never lies. He only says what he saw with his own eyes.

Reflection questions

1. What could have been the consequences if Mamad had lied or provided a definitive answer to the queen?
2. How did Mamad's response to the queen still maintain his integrity while fulfilling the king's request?
3. Have you ever felt you had to lie to your colleagues? Could you have done differently?

Management link

Mamad's message to the queen illustrates the importance of clear communication. In leadership, conveying messages precisely can prevent misunderstandings and ensure everyone is on the same page. Clear communication helps people make decisions. However, although Mamad did not lie, his message did not help the queen decide her course of action.

However, sometimes, a leader must communicate uncertainty or when the absolute truth can't be conveyed. To avoid making false promises, leaders need to constantly consider reliability versus truthfulness to earn the trust of their team and stakeholders.

Topics

Ethical leadership, integrity, communication

Nkusi is a young orphan who lost his parents. He lives with his grandmother, a sweet old lady. One day, the grandmother feels she has not much longer to live and calls her grandson to discuss her inheritance. She gives him a small millet stalk growing in her compound. Nkusi is surprised. How is a small stalk going to help him? But his grandmother promises that the stalk will give him either a cow or a bride.

As Nkusi was puzzling over his situation after his grandmother's death, a chicken came and ate his millet. He said to the chicken: 'Hey, how dare you eat my millet, left to me by Mukaka, who promised that if it doesn't bring me a cow, it will bring me a bride. You must pay.' The chicken understood and gave him an egg.

Nkusi took the egg and left home to seek his fortune. He came upon a slippery road, fell and broke his egg. He said to the road: 'How dare you break my egg, given to me by the chicken that ate my millet, the millet left to me by Mukaka, who promised that if it doesn't bring me a cow, it will bring me a bride.'

The slippery road gave Nkusi a ball of mud, and he continued his way. The young man then encountered a river that gave him water, which was consumed by a blacksmith he encountered, who gave him a coin. The coin was taken by a hairdresser, who gave him a comb. He met many more people and, finally, some who were on their way to getting a bride.

Each time, he loses what he had previously received and gains something new from the encounter. Nkusi keeps repeating his grandmother's legacy and everything that has happened before. In the end, he returns to his grandmother's house with not only a bride but also many cows.



Reflection questions

1. How did Nkusi's ability to adapt to new situations help him achieve his goal?
2. When and how did Nkusi start to believe his goals could be reached?
3. Have you ever been in an unexpected situation but still found value in it?

Management link

This story is about overcoming a seemingly desperate situation by taking advantage of each opportunity, perseverance, and believing in one's destiny.

Nkusi's journey underscores the critical management principles of problem-solving and negotiation. As he navigates each setback, he turns obstacles into opportunities through creative problem-solving, much like managers must do in a dynamic business environment. His ability to negotiate and extract value from every encounter highlights the importance of negotiation skills in securing resources and support.

Topics

Resourcefulness, problem-solving, negotiation

South Sudan



This lovely couple had been courting for years. One day, the man proposed to his lifelong girlfriend. She happily agreed but gave him one condition: 'Unless you build me the most perfect house, we cannot marry.' Determined to meet her high standards, the young man set out to create the perfect home.

He spent months searching for the finest materials, consulting with architects, and striving to ensure every detail was flawless. Meanwhile, his girlfriend waited patiently, though she began to worry as the project seemed never-ending.

One day, the young man visited his mother's house. As he peeped through the window, he saw his mother eating while caring for his younger siblings. She wiped the baby's messes without hesitation and continued her meal without fuss. The son was emotionally touched by the simplicity and love of his mother's actions.

He entered the house and said, 'Mother, I have been trying to build the most perfect house for my fiancée, but seeing you care for my siblings so effortlessly makes me realize something important.'

His mother smiled and replied, 'Perfection is not in the materials or the design, but in the love and effort you put into it.'

Inspired, the young man decided to build a good, comfortable house instead of the perfect one. He used the best materials he had already gathered but focused on creating a warm, loving home rather than a flawless one.

She was moved and said, 'This is perfect because it is made with love.'

Reflection questions

1. How did the young man's realization about his mother's efforts influence him?
2. What does the story say about striving for perfection?
3. Have you been in situations where aiming for perfection got in the way of achieving good results?

Management link

The story shows that trying to be perfect can slow you down and make things harder. Instead, focus on making progress because good is good enough. Managers should remember the adagio 'perfect is the enemy of good'. Having high standards and work ethics can be an asset, but if we overdo it , this become a pitfall. Daniel Ofman's model on Core Qualities shows that every quality, however positive, has a pitfall if we overuse it. Setting realistic goals, and balancing high standards with practical solutions, creates a positive and productive work environment.

Topics

Goal setting, core qualities and pitfalls, standards

Kenya

Once upon a time, there was a poor woman who lived with four daughters in a small village. She was a soap maker. This required empty palm bundles that she would burn to ash and then soak in water. She would then filter the ashy water to extract the lye. This alkaline substance is the core of the soap-making process. Mixed with oil, it would turn to black soap. The process would take several weeks. When ready, people would come from the neighbouring villages to buy the soap.

One day, they waited for buyers, but nobody came. All day into the late evening, no one came to buy soap. Even the next few days, there were no buyers. Meanwhile, they had no food to eat at home. At some point, the daughters could not bear the hunger anymore. They cried, and their mother was forced to approach the rich woman in the neighbourhood to beg for food.

But the rich woman and her son, blinded by their wealth, mocked the poor woman and drove her away from their house. The rich woman's son, in his arrogance, ridiculed her: 'Do you think we will ever need anything from you? No! Go away!'

The following day the rich woman fell ill. She went to see a herbalist doctor for treatment. The herbalist told the rich woman's son to pay him some money and to bring him empty palm bundles to make medicine. But the only way to get these was deep in the forest. The rich son did not even know how to get there, let alone how to collect the bundles. The only place he could think of was at the soap maker's house. But because of what they had done, he was afraid to go to her house and ask for help. Finally, to save his mother's life he summoned enough courage to go visit her.



The Soap Maker and Her Four Daughters / Kenya

He pleaded for forgiveness, but the poor woman refused. The son even invited the neighbourhood people to help him plead to accept one-quarter of his mother's wealth in exchange for an empty palm bundle.

After a while, the rich woman's sickness became so serious that her son had no option but to give the poor woman half of his mother's wealth to save her life. The soap maker was able to invest in better equipment, and she became a prosperous business - making not only soap but also lotions, creams and other natural wash and skin products.

Reflection questions

1. How did the soap maker turn a difficult situation into a successful opportunity?
2. How did the rich son's initial approach to the conflict with the soap maker escalate the situation?

Management link

This story shows different conflict management styles. Initially, the rich woman and her son use a competing style, prioritizing their own needs and ignoring the soap maker, which makes the conflict worse. When the rich son's mother falls ill, he first thinks about avoiding the confrontation due to guilt but ultimately chooses an accommodating style by asking for forgiveness and offering wealth. The involvement of the community helps shift to a collaborative style, where both parties work together to find a solution that benefits everyone. Finally, the resolution involves a compromise, where the son gives half of his mother's wealth to the soap maker. These five conflict handling styles by Thomas-Kilmann are useful tools for managers to understand and apply in different situations.

Topics

Conflict management, negotiation skills

Nigeria



Many years ago, the sun and water were great friends, and both lived on the earth together. The sun often visited the water, but the water never returned his visits. Finally, the sun asked the water why he had never visited. The water replied that the sun's house was not big enough and that it would drive the sun out if he came with his water.
Water said: 'If you wish me to visit you, you must build a vast compound. It has to be a tremendous place, as my water people are very numerous and take up a lot of room.'

The sun promised this and returned home to his wife, the moon, who greeted the sun with a broad smile when he opened the door. The sun told the moon what he had promised the water and, the next day, commenced building a huge compound.

When it was completed, he asked the water to visit him the next day. Water arrived and asked the sun whether it would be safe for him to enter. The sun nodded and answered, 'Yes, come in, my friend.'

The water began to flow in, accompanied by the fish and all the water animals. Soon, the water was knee-deep, so he asked again if it was safe, and the sun confirmed. The water flowed on until the sun and moon had to perch themselves on the top of the roof.

Again, the water addressed the sun and received the same answer. And more water kept gushing in until it overflowed the sky. Eventually, the sun and moon were forced to go up into the sky, where they have remained ever since.

Reflection questions

1. Why did the water repeatedly ask if it was safe to come in?
2. What qualities does the sun demonstrate in his interactions with the water?
3. How could the sun have planned better to prevent overflowing?

Management link

The folktale of the sun and water highlights crucial aspects of resource management, particularly capacity planning and risk assessment. The sun's decision to build a larger compound to accommodate the water symbolizes the importance of accurately assessing resource needs and scalability. Planning is one of the critical tasks of the manager. Obviously, the sun had not anticipated the overwhelming influx of water, which tells us about his failure to plan or do a risk assessment. All businesses and organisations need financial, human, physical and technological resources. Balancing these four types of resources is essential because if the proportions are incorrect, it can drown a business.

Topics

Resource management, risk assessment, capacity planning, efficiency



The stunning and detailed illustrations in this book were created using AI.

This edition was published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of MDF Training & Consultancy and is not for sale.
Design by Marja van Lieshout, Valisz.nl

© 2024 MDF - All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of MDF.