

Overcoming the leadership deficit in Africa

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29 Jan 2020

As stressed by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the cultivation of leaders with exceptional character and skills is critical to Africa's development. However, WEF also goes on to state that "it is too late to teach someone who occupies a high position in government how to lead". What is the answer to overcoming Africa's leadership deficit in order to tackle the grave challenges the continent faces? The solution for Africa lies in developing the next generation of leaders.



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With the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) deadline looming ever closer, there is a growing focus on and urgency for achieving the various defined objectives. And while it is imperative to mobilise both African and global communities into action and to take positive steps towards realising each of the goals, our efforts often treat the symptoms and not the cause. For example, foreign aid and support is essential to address issues such as healthcare, poverty, hunger and clean water. However, in itself, aid does not deal with why Africa faces such dire challenges. Of course, there are historical factors, inequalities and other injustices which have played a direct role in the development of these societal issues. But focusing only on the past is not going to help solve these problems – we need to look to the present and – very importantly – the future.

Forward-looking lens

When we adopt a forward-looking lens, it is clear that leadership is undeniably one of the most influential factors on economic stability, unemployment and socio-political progress. The type of leaders a country has affects every aspect of how it operates – from how it attracts foreign investment to job creation and policies that either promote or impede growth. Africa needs to find, nurture and support the emergence of a critical mass of young leaders who can shift the needle for the continent - leaders with big ideas and dreams, energy to innovate, and mindsets which won't settle for the status quo. The kind of leaders we need sitting at the proverbial decision-making table, influencing outcomes for the Africa we want.

In order to breed the kind of young change agents Africa needs, it is imperative that we look at the education system on the continent with a more critical lens. In our experience at the African Leadership Academy (ALA), a well-rounded education system must be supported by three key pillars: first, school must foster a strong academic foundation and equip young people with transferrable and relevant skills. We must also offer young leaders' networks that support their leadership

journeys by embracing them in communities of like-minded people, made up of established leaders and other young leaders with similar inclinations for change in various sectors. Finally, we need to focus on impact and outcomes related to the causes that drive young leaders, and emphasise that personal success - material or otherwise - and social impact are not mutually exclusive.

Committing to change

Social impact and transformation can only be accomplished by leaders who genuinely care and are committed to achieving change for generations to come. An ethical, innovative, collaborative and forward-thinking approach to pedagogy is required to get us there. As succinctly stated by Graça Machel, “Africa does not need leaders who are 75 or 65 years old. We need leaders who are young, vibrant, innovative and who the continent’s youth can relate to”. Intervening at the adolescent stage of a potential leader’s life has the most impact. This is because around adolescence, an individual has enough sense of “self” to be self-reflective and mentored to build positive habits that will last long term, yet they have not already built undesirable habits that cannot be changed.



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Through strategically designed and executed educational methods, Africa can incubate and develop young leaders - and a real shift in the African landscape (and beyond) can be achieved. These young trailblazers will positively influence decision-making and start closing the leadership gap. And a leadership revolution is just what is needed to move Africa and the world forward economically, socially and progressively as we work to achieve a common continental and global development agenda. Africa is ready for change – and it is time to answer the call.

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