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Vision Quest: Learning about Leadership Development in Malawi

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Introduction

Research into what makes civil society leaders in Malawi change behaviour¹ yielded some startling implications for leadership development. It highlighted the need to focus on the individual's self-development, be holistic, touch both intellect and emotions and provide opportunities for feedback and reflection. These conclusions tallied with INTRAC and CABUNGO's own experiences of leadership development in Malawi over the past seven years. To follow the recommendations, we contracted Vision Quest, a South African organisation, to come to Malawi and facilitate a 'Leadership and Management Dynamics' (LMD) programme in 2004.

Vision Quest Africa is a consultancy specialising in building capacity towards more productive, efficient and professional organisations and individuals. It has delivered the course in Leadership and Management Dynamics over 60 times in the last 10 years in Southern and Eastern Africa as well as South East Asia. Participants have come from 24 countries. The programme has been run for people from all walks of life and all sectors (business, hospitals, schools, universities, municipalities, development NGOs, government departments etc.). Vision Quest is an accredited partner of the Desmond Tutu Leadership Academy.

www.visionquestafrica.com

¹ James, R. (2003) 'Leaders Changing Inside-Out', INTRAC Occasional Papers Series No. 43 and James, R. (2005) 'Autocratics Anonymous', PraxisNote No. 14 (www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote14.html).

Twenty local NGO leaders were sponsored by international NGOs such as CORDAID, Oxfam and Norwegian Church Aid to participate in the two module course. While we would not claim unmitigated success, participant reaction at the end of the second module was so favourable that it had clearly made a massive difference to the lives and leadership of those who completed the course. Many already talked about a radical transformation, though time will obviously tell more. The enthusiasm for the course made us, as organisers, stop and reflect on what had worked and why. We felt that this knowledge would help us and others build on successful leadership development practice. This PraxisNote is our attempt to articulate what we learnt.

1. Focus on the Leader as a Person

The most striking difference between Vision Quest and other leadership development programmes is its focus on the leader as an individual human being. Many participants highlighted the novelty and power of this approach:

I have been on 20 courses, but this is the first course that has focused on me as an individual and not just focused on me, but challenged me.'

Most management courses focus on organisational systems and structures and skills, but very rarely do they give the

opportunity for managers to examine themselves as individuals.'

'This is the first course about me.'

Many leadership training programmes focus on what leaders need *to know* (such as understanding organisational strategy, systems, structures and staff) or what leaders need *to do* (the skills involved in leading others). The Vision Quest approach is different because it focuses on who leaders want *to be*. Instead of looking at what leaders do to others, it first examines who leaders are themselves as individuals. The point of departure is the participant's own experience and life. The Vision Quest founders and facilitators believe:

'the lack of organisational effectiveness and motivation has very little to do with people's organisational skills, but a lot to do with personal leadership and self-management. This includes examining one's personal attitude, life purpose and values, interpersonal skills, and understanding yourself better. Any programme building leadership capacity has to start with the individual leader him/herself.'

The Vision Quest approach is rooted in the belief that change has to start from within and leaders can only change their organisation if they can change themselves. They often quote the Community Development Resource Association's (CDRA) admonishment that: 'You cannot intervene in the development processes of other people if you are not involved and conscious of your own?'

In the following sections we will explore key elements of the Vision Quest approach. These are:

- Developing self-awareness
- Promoting hope in people
- Taking a holistic view of leaders

- Helping people to discover their core purpose

Self-awareness

Clearly it is difficult to change yourself if you do not really know yourself and as a result, the Vision Quest programme devotes significant time to helping leaders understand their different temperaments and tendencies. Participants commented:

'it helped me understand myself better. I know my temperament and more importantly how I can put it to good use.'

'self-examination and awareness are key.'

'self-discovery leads to self-recovery'.

As leaders become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses they develop strategies to work on their weaker areas in both their professional and personal lives. Better self-understanding also enables people to understand and work with the differences of others, resulting in improved relationships. The Vision Quest approach is not a negative and problem-centred approach, it is about accepting and celebrating who you are and, to a degree, what you are not.

Hope to change

A key element of the Vision Quest approach is the emphasis on promoting hope in people. Vision Quest believes that if you want people to change they have to have hope. They emphasise that people have free will in how they respond to different stimuli and that they are able to take charge of their own lives and not be a victim of other people's agendas. It also helps people realise their inner capacities that they might not have fully appreciated before. In the words of two participants, the course:

'is rich and has revealed hidden treasures in me. I didn't know I have gold deposits in me!'

'is about rediscovering your innermost unstirred potentials that you are endowed with at birth, but might not be using.'

One popular technique of Vision Quest is to decorate the walls of the training room with inspiring quotes and speeches by famous people that touch people's emotions. For example you can read excerpts from Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech and Nelson Mandela's powerful words at the Rivonia Trial.

'Past forms, past perceptions. We have made these things. We can unmake them.'
Ben Okri

'Your imagination is your preview to life's coming attractions.'
Albert Einstein

'It takes courage to do what you want. Other people have a lot of plans for you.'
Joseph Campbell

'You can never change society if you have not changed yourself.'
Nelson Mandela

'Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.'
Soren Kierkegaard

'An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.'
Victor Hugo

'If we have truly committed to follow our dream, we will find a powerful force exists beyond ourselves and our conscious will, a force that helps us along the way nurturing our quest and transformation.'
Joseph Jaworski

Holistic view

The Vision Quest approach takes a very holistic view of leaders. Participants

identify the variety of different roles they play, not just at work, but also at home, in the family and in their community. They also look at the different elements of a person: the social-emotional, the spiritual, the physical and the mental. Input and discussion on issues such as cognitive psychology and spirituality are interwoven through the course, but the facilitators are quick to point out that:

'Although spirituality is an important component in the programme, the facilitation approach has no specific religious preference. Respect, tolerance, and appreciation of all spiritual traditions are promoted, as well as tolerance and respect for those who choose not to see spirituality as a part of their lives.'

There is considerable emphasis placed on physical health, with daily exercise classes and sessions on nutrition and healthy eating. Vision Quest makes specific links between these different elements and encourages participants to continually 'sharpen the saw' – that is to look after themselves. As a result, participants highlight their learning about:

'the importance of the physical and spiritual aspect in sharpening the saw.'

'the power of spirituality in our daily lives.'

'I have seriously taken on board issues of physical exercises, healthy eating and sleep in being an effective leader.'

As a result of this holistic approach the course is very relevant to the whole of people's lives. One participant commented:

'This course is real, live, workable, fluid, practical and action-oriented. You don't struggle to make it work. It is easily embedded in one's life.'

Purpose in life

The essence of the Vision Quest approach and even its name is to help leaders discover their core purpose in life – going on a ‘vision quest’ in the North American Indian tradition. They believe that this vision is ultimately what is most important and strategic for a leader – their gift to the world. For some participants this was quite a revelation:

‘I suddenly realised that individuals could have vision and purpose too, not just organisations.’

Leaders, as all people do, have a yearning to contribute, to make a difference in the world and have a meaning to life. The facilitators observe that people are energised by reconnecting with their core purpose and say that:

‘a person who is connected consciously to their vision is naturally more open to change and flexible, because they are less defensive and insecure.’

Finding purpose in life is inextricably linked to peoples’ values and who they want to be. As a result the Vision Quest approach is much more about helping people clarify their underlying values and attitudes that underpin their behaviour as leaders than about training them in leadership knowledge and skills. As such it might be better described as leadership formation rather than training (though skills and knowledge will also be acquired in the process).

2. Individual and Intellectual Challenge

As well as the focus on the leader as a person, Vision Quest emphasises the importance of leaders challenging themselves both individually and intellectually.

Example of a Personal Mission Statement

- I will live a life that fears, honours and obeys God. My devotional and prayer life shall be a daily priority.
- I will sharpen my saw and take good care of myself, aware that my mind, spirit and body are my true assets.
- I will do to others as I would want done to me. I love people, will love people and will help people realise and release their maximum potential.
- I will live a balanced life and faithfully fulfil all my roles at any moment. I will make space and time weekly for action, reflection, learning and planning.
- I will endeavour to develop myself and be all I need to be in order to do all I need to do in this life.
- I will keep on learning, improving and growing to be the best husband, father, communicator, author, writer, leader, manager, preacher and teacher of God’s word that I can be. Thus, I will have made my best contribution to this world and life.
- I will dream big dreams and my dream of touching nations and presidents will come to pass.
- In everything I do I will strive for excellence and integrity.
- I will seek knowledge, wisdom and further education to the highest levels possible and necessary.
- I will say no to any burdens not meant for me to carry.

Individual space

The Vision Quest course creates space for leaders to stop in the midst of their busy schedules and reflect on their own lives and consider their future. Most leaders are generally too busy to sit down and think and therefore to change. As a residential course, Vision Quest gives people reflective individual exercises each evening to write up in their journals (reinforced the next day by mentor pair

discussions). Participants have the opportunity to create their own visions and dreams. Participants have two separate weeks to turn inward and ask: Who am I? Where do I come from? What do I want to be? Where do I want to go? The facilitators believe that we often underestimate peoples' abilities and capacity to learn and to challenge themselves on a deeper level. Many participants expressed how tough it was to make themselves face the hard issues and questions, but as they did so, found one of the main benefits of the course was the:

'space given in exercises to challenge myself.'

Others felt that this space also:

'space that allowed God the opportunity to speak into your life.'

Intellectual challenge

As well as being individually challenging, the Vision Quest course is also intellectually challenging. It is a reaction against what Vision Quest have observed in other training programmes that either still follow the 'lecture-to-death-paradigm', or have thrown the baby out with the bath water and 'offer no or very little intellectual depth, challenge and exposure, resulting in simplistic analysis and unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved'.

Vision Quest strongly believes that behavioural change only really takes place when the learning experience is both intellectual as well as emotional, not either/or.

The course contains considerable theoretical input, but this is carefully managed. Most is front-loaded in the first module and only a limited number of models are used, such as:

- 'temperaments' personality model (Littauer basing her work on the

Hippocratic model of personalities being a combination of sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic);

- the 'fight/flee' response model (Tournier who asserted that most people handle conflict and stress by either subconsciously fighting or fleeing);
- their own 'files' model in which our past experiences are recorded and continue to influence future behaviour.

These models are attractively simple, without being too simplistic and are continually reinforced throughout the whole programme. Participants found these models very enlightening, saying that:

'I have learnt to understand myself and other people better through the exercise of temperaments.'

'I have learnt how to resolve conflicts and stresses using the Paul Tournier model.'

The theoretical inputs are provided as handouts in the course folder. Only a few subjects from each theme are introduced in the sessions – information on the other areas is provided in the handouts. Participants are expected to spend time reading and studying these handouts both during and between the modules. A selected bibliography list with short descriptions is also provided.

Useful planning tools are a core part of the programme. The facilitators believe that: 'we need tools and systems (technology) to help us achieve our dreams and goals. The most beautiful dream will remain a dream unless we are able to translate it into action, both on a personal and an organisational level'. Such planning tools include developing a personal mission statement (as illustrated above) and weekly time management systems (such as Steven Covey's time

management system of identifying roles and goals and planning them on a weekly basis – see Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.)

3. Process and Methodology

The Vision Quest approach to leadership development uses a modular process and employees very specific training methodologies.

Modular process

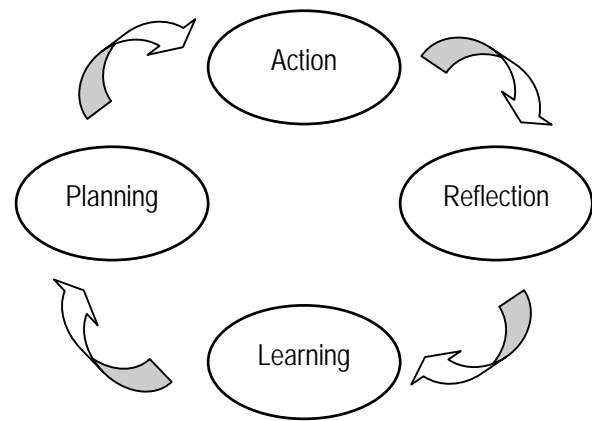
The LMD programme has two four-day workshop modules, which are held two to three months apart. During the period between the two modules, participants are expected to do reading, studying, tasks and other assignments. This also allows participants time to digest the learning from the first module. The idea is that formation work, which deals with ‘what goes on behind the learning’, is slower and requires more follow-through than knowledge or skills development. One participant likened it to:

‘planting a seed and coming back two to three months later to tend it.’

Interestingly 85% of participants find that it was the second module that proved to be the main catalyst for change. This was because they come back, having had the opportunity to do revision, undertake new assignments and test out the ideas – and then have the opportunity to reflect together on how it went – sharing their experience and helping each other with tips on problems.

Action learning methodology

The Vision Quest approach is based on an action learning methodology. Central to this methodology is the action learning cycle, which distinguishes four key processes: action, reflection, learning and planning, as is illustrated in the diagram:



This process starts with the participant’s own experience and life. It is used throughout the programme, not only as a conceptual framework and methodology, but also as an approach to life in general.

Variety of learning techniques

Vision Quest uses a variety of learning methodologies including:

- mentor pairs (whereby participants find another person to discuss their personal reflections and plans)
- triads (small groups of three people discussing set questions to ensure participant engagement with the issues and the hearing of other perspectives)
- journaling (individual reflections and plans are written in personal journals, encouraging implementation and review)
- stories (using narrative stories of individual people to illustrate theories)
- quotes (as powerful reminders of what we know deep down, expressed in a clear, concise and memorable way)
- personal disclosure from facilitators (if facilitators expect people to open up they need to open up themselves and admit their struggles)
- colourful flipcharts (many pre-prepared and regularly changed)

- video (followed by systematic debriefing discussion)
- ‘opmaat’ groups (starting the day with a humorous skit or feedback about the key lessons of the previous day in only five minutes)
- physical exercise instruction (30 minutes at the end of each day)
- handouts including a diary/personal planner; a resistance training exercise kit; a workshop journal/manual; and a certificate of achievement on completion of the programme

Module content

Each day started with an optional meditation or spiritual thought for the day. There was then a review of the learning from the previous day by participant groups. Each day finished with a physical exercise session. In the evenings participants had 1–2 hours of homework in the form of individual exercises, planning, reflection, reading, and mentor pair discussions. Some of the main content areas covered during the modules included:

Module 1

Day 1

Getting to know each other
LMD outline + action learning approach
Temperaments model (self-assessment exercise and discussion)

Day 2

LMD principles and questionnaire
River of life exercise
Vision and mission input
Roles and goals exercise

Day 3

Share personal mission statements
Time management and physical clutter
Cognitive distortions and behaviour
Nutrition and health

Day 4

Spirituality and leadership

Sharpening the saw personal reflection
Action learning next steps and priorities
Review

Module 2

Day 1

Connecting exercise since last time
Revision of main points from Module 1
What has happened since? What challenges faced? Lessons learnt?
Golden rules of leadership and management

Day 2

Video ‘The man who planted trees’
Vision exercise – I dream a world
Leadership and HIV/AIDS in families
Vision exercise - Big Yes Big No
Finalise mission statements

Day 3

Present mission statements
Cognitive therapy discussions
Tools and systems for filing, paper work, workspace, computers

Day 4

Facing the challenges of implementation
Learning assessment questionnaire
Present Golden Rules of Management
Evaluation

4. Facilitation

One of the obvious ‘secrets’ to the Vision Quest success is that the facilitators are experienced, competent and confident. This meant they are both open to other inputs, while remaining clear about the course boundaries and objectives. They also made significant adjustments to their approach in the light of participant feedback from the first module. They were infectiously passionate about assisting leaders to learn about themselves and change. They are also highly organised. As one participant commented: *‘It is the most organised and well-planned workshop I have ever attended in my life’.*

One of the ways the facilitators showed how organised they were was that they sent very specific instructions for what sort of venue would be appropriate at the initial negotiation stage. It needed to provide the reflective space that is required for formation work.

5. Impact

It is obvious from immediate participant responses after the programme that it did have a major impact on them. At the end of the second module 82% of participants rated the experience as 'excellent'. Some of their comments included:

'Transformational!'

'This course touches the core of your heart in rediscovering your innermost unstirred potentials.'

'The course has opened up a new horizon in my life.'

'The course was very inspiring. Spirituality has been the key to success.'

To find out whether there had been lasting impact, follow-up was given to participants 18 months after the training to identify what had changed as a result of participating in the LMD course. The evaluation responses were:

Life balance and time management were major areas of change:

'I am now more organised, especially on time management.'

'I am now able to account for my time effectively.'

'Time management, planning and prioritisation.'

'I have developed my own weekly planning schedules whereby I plan not only for activities related to work, but activities related to family, friends, church and personal.'

The changes were more significant than simply better time management; they were more about **strategic life management**. As one participant noted:

'Planning life on a weekly basis according to all your major roles causes you to lead a more balanced life. If any legitimate role is not planned for, it never really gets achieved and remains unfinished business. I definitely think my life is getting more balanced since the course. I am learning how to be purpose-oriented and not activity-oriented. This is helping me live life more intelligently and strategically.'

Better **understanding of the characters and strengths of other people** was also consistently highlighted. One participant reflected:

'I realise that since no two people are alike, I can not expect others to perceive things the way I do. This uniqueness calls for patience and understanding and also an endeavour to focus more on strengths rather than weaknesses. My new approaches have resulted in increased loyalty and motivation among the staff.'

Another commented:

'That course also helped me to appreciate and understand better the characters of other people.' Yet another highlighted: *'I think the course defined well issues of diversity. Managers and leaders have to support culturally diverse groups of people.'*

Finally in the area of **sharpening the saw** (looking after yourself), one respondent identified that:

'I have become more responsible for my physical health as a result of the course. My eating habits have definitely changed. My health is improving.'

6. Conclusion

At first glance, the Vision Quest programme might appear relatively expensive (\$1100 per person in Malawi for two four-day modules) as compared with one-off training events. The high costs were largely due to the modular and residential process of formation (two elements essential to its success). It was time-consuming for busy leaders, a factor that contributed to some dropping out of the first module. There were also improvements that could be made to the handouts folder. It was important that the spirituality discussions should take the belief system of the group as a starting point, rather than push people towards different faiths.

But overall it is clear that the Vision Quest approach to leadership development is a strong example of good capacity building practice. Leadership development programmes should think through whether it is appropriate to integrate aspects of the Vision Quest approach such as:

- dealing with the leader as a holistic individual
 - developing self-awareness
 - bringing hope that change is possible
 - focusing on the leader's purpose in life
 - giving space to individuals to challenge themselves
 - challenging participants both intellectually and emotionally
 - having modular inputs with 2–3 months in-between
 - taking an iterative approach to learning
 - using an action learning methodology
 - employing innovative methodologies such as mentor pairs and journaling
- ensuring that the facilitators are passionate, learning and experienced
 - having extremely well-prepared and organised facilitators

There is probably much we could do differently and better in our future leadership development programmes if we were to really take these important lessons on board.