

## Navigating Newness: Building Leadership Capacity To Master The Entrepreneurial Terrain In Africa

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### ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the challenges of capacity building initiatives to develop future-ready leaders to enable and sustain Africa's innovation ambitions. An important distinction is drawn between skills development and capacity building which is then used to identify the types of initiatives often lacking in traditional approaches. Attention is given to the significance of leadership attitudes and behaviours. A variety of complications with the competence-capacity model are identified and potential mitigations suggested. Such mitigations are essential to the task of building sustainable leadership capacity. The NESTA model of the innovation ecosystem is adapted to illustrate how the resourceful leader could affect sustainable and impactful innovation. Finally, the paper highlights the connection between the demographic, talent and entrepreneurial dividends awaiting the Continent through intentional capacity building initiatives.

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**Keywords:** Capacity building. Leadership development. Innovation. Talent dividend. Entrepreneurship

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### INTRODUCTION

Equipping organisations to navigate the complexities of the emerging fourth industrial revolution has never been more demanding. The infiltration of the digital domain into most aspects of 21st Century life, and the emergence of the artificial intelligence (AI) paradigm, place huge and unprecedented demands on organisations and their people and, as a corollary, they also provide rich opportunities. The AI paradigm, in particular, presents an exciting prospect for the Continent of Africa to aspire to be a global player in technology development and exploitation. It was encouraging to note at the Global AI Summit on Africa, 2025 [1] organised by the Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution [2] in partnership with the World Economic Forum [3] a subtle but important shift in language. In recent years, a driving mantra has been '*African solutions for African problems*' – now the prevailing aphorism was '*African solutions for global problems*'. This is no subtle shift in tone but an inchoate recognition that Africa need no longer be a consumer of technology, but an originator; no longer playing catch-up but helping to set the agenda. As the CEO of Smart Africa [4] commented, "*Let's not outsource our future.*"

Of course, aspiration and delivery are two entirely separate things, but the shift in aspirational language is no small matter. Delivering the ambition and creating transformative socioeconomic impact for the Continent amidst uncertainty and ambiguity, and in the face of rapid innovation, will require skills and human capacity of the highest order.

But how might this be achieved sustainably and with focused impact within the resource constraints and cultural particularities of the African Continent?

### Building Sustainable Leadership Capacity

The impending '*demographic dividend*' of the African Continent is often cited with great anticipation. This is built on a recognition of the remarkable youthfulness of the population of Africa with the concomitant potential for that latent energy and tech-savvy to unleash transformative impact. This potential is undoubtedly huge, but it is essential to recognise that it is not automatic that the '*demographic dividend*' translates into a '*talent dividend*' without intentional intervention.

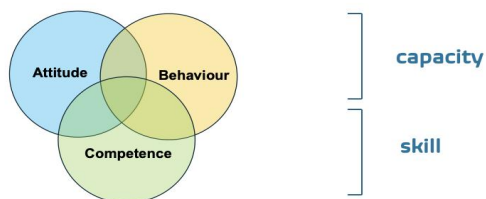
For nations to flourish in this complex and changing environment, they require focused investment in their most important resource – their people. Similarly, organisations of all types will need to invest in targeted capacity building if they are to fulfil their ambitions and potential. The complexity of the task requires robust methodology. Complex contexts require nuanced approaches.

The nature of the task might helpfully be captured by the concept of '*navigating newness*'. The noun 'newness' captures the quality of flux within the environment in which Africa is moving and the innovative opportunities being embraced. It is suggestive of imagination, anticipation, openness, risk appetite, and courage. The verb 'navigating' addresses the task of intentionally traversing this challenging landscape and invokes the attributes

required for success. It conjures ideas of skill, attention, analysis, curiosity, and creativity.

Navigating newness is, for me, a valuable descriptor of the leadership task confronting African [5] leaders as they embrace the Continental agendas outlined above. Our conceptualisation and design of capacity building initiatives in this context must embrace not only core leadership attributes but also the task of navigating newness. But first, it is essential that we first address precisely what we mean by *capacity building*. The term capacity building is often used interchangeably with skills development or competence growth. While interconnected, these are not identical.

**Skill** relates to what we can do – the individual attributes of knowledge, experience and competence that allow us to execute tasks. **Capacity**, on the other hand, relates to how we think – how we conceive and how we operate in our individual contexts. Viewed from another perspective, we might choose to view the ability of an individual through the interconnected lenses of competence, behaviour and attitude.



Oftentimes, the focus of capacity building is almost entirely on competence. This is **necessary but not sufficient**. The way we behave within our work context fundamentally influences the impact of our competence on our performance. Our behaviours, in turn, are strongly influenced by our attitudes, as shaped by our mindsets and personal character.

Truly impactful capacity building requires balanced attention to be given to each of these, whereby we acquire new skills, learn new leadership behaviours, and adopt transformative mindsets and worldviews. In other words, we have an holistic approach which addresses the whole person.

Navigating newness with impact and resilience requires high-order leadership where competence and capacity are each well-developed and synergise. The task of sustainable leadership development in Africa requires due attention to be paid in tandem to each. The three-lens model above presents a helpful framework to guide the design of leadership development initiatives

In their recent book, TomorrowMind [6], Gabriella Kellerman and Martin Seligman, offer a powerful

exposition of how leaders who are well equipped through the twin-lenses of our capacity model can flourish in their professional lives and drive sustainable impact. Their five-component PRISM model is well suited to be mapped into the two-dimensional space of our capacity model. The five components are:

1. **Prospection (P)**: The uniquely human ability to imagine and plan for disparate futures, so that we are in a greater state of empowerment and readiness for whatever is to come.
2. **Resilience (R)**: Bouncing back from change unharmed – or, better yet, growing stronger through adversity.
3. **Innovation and creativity (I)**: The ability to generate novel, surprising, and useful solutions to problems. We can cultivate this ability at all levels.
4. **Social support, by way of rapid rapport (S)**: The ability to build trust quickly across interpersonal difference and geographic distance, with both customers and colleagues
5. **Mattering and meaning (M)**: The motivation to fuel the work of navigating each successive chapter of change.

Their analysis offers compelling insights into how the attributes of a high-capacity leader manifest in tangible and impactful ways. Moreover, the PRISM can usefully inform the design and delivery of capacity interventions.

It is a given that, although simply formulated, impactful implementation of the three-lens capacity-competence model is subject to many complexities. These include:

**Resource Constraints.** Limited financial and human resources pose significant challenges to capacity building efforts, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

High quality capacity building is not necessarily cheap – neither should it be exorbitantly expensive if designed well – but the return on investment (ROI) is potentially huge. The human resource element should not be overlooked here. The availability of skilled and credible professionals to deliver impactful capacity building programs is not guaranteed in many African settings, which reality itself becomes part of the capacity building requirement.

**Resistance to Change.** Resistance to change is a common challenge encountered in capacity building initiatives, especially when stakeholders and participants are accustomed to traditional practices and wedded to entrenched systems. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are essential requisites for impact, and collaborative approaches that enable the co-creation and implementation of capacity building

interventions can enable acceptance. Creating a culture of continuous learning and adaptation within societies and organisations, coupled with evoking a growth mindset among individuals, is essential for fostering positive change.

**Sustainability.** Ensuring the sustainability of capacity building interventions remains a persistent challenge for practitioners and policymakers and many initiatives struggle to maintain momentum once initial funding ends or external support is withdrawn. Longevity needs to be designed into the process from the outset. Partnership working, embracing the benefits of scale, exploiting EdTech capabilities and implanting delivery capacity within participating organisations are all key contributors to developing sustainable impact.

**Contextual Complexity.** Perhaps above all challenges, the contextual particularities of the specific environments in which the capacity building initiatives are to be delivered pose significant challenges to program design and implementation. Cultural norms, political structures, socioeconomic realities, organisational design and governance, antecedent educational foundations, and historic influences can all influence the effectiveness of capacity building interventions. Implanting ready-made solutions from the Global North is not a credible solution, though often utilised.

It could be argued that these complexities have a particular significance in the domain of capacity building (as defined by the two-lens model) as opposed to skills development. A key reason for this is born from the very nature of the delivery mechanisms. Skills development is amenable to competence building initiatives which can effectively be delivered with efficiency at scale and with guided individual learning. While capacity building, as conceptualised through the twin lenses of *attitude* and *behaviour*, can be partially addressed in these ways, its maximal realisation is achieved through a more individualistic approach. The apotheosis of capacity building is accomplished through coaching/mentoring methodologies.

Relatively speaking such capacity building constitutes more **resource intensive** initiatives though there is a substantial evidence base to support the value-add of coaching. For example, the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services report, *Leveraging Coaching and Mentoring to Create More Effective Leaders* [7] demonstrates clearly the differential between traditional L&D (learning and development) approaches and coaching. The coaching ripple effect [8] compounds the ROI by the enhanced benefit derived by multiple layers within an organisation and not just the leader her(him)self.

Costs can be mitigated through the effective use of group coaching, though operating this in tandem with individual 1:1 coaching is optimal. Adoption of online coaching services, such as those offered by Torch [9] and CoachHub [10], that seek to democratise coaching away from its traditional preserve of executive leadership can substantially reduce cost yet still offer remarkable impact. AI coaching [11] is still in its infancy and has many detractors, but deployed with care, and perhaps in supplementary fashion to more traditional approaches, has the potential to reduce cost [12]. A key mitigation is through the development of additional coaching capacity [13] within the local ecosystem to grow sustainable, low-cost provision.

The resistance to change challenge is particularly acute when viewed through the personal lenses of attitude and behaviour. Such changes produce greater personal affect than do required changes in competence and are much more likely to generate resistance, often of a profound nature. In this regard, coaching is also established as a go-to modality [14]. In my own work as a professional executive coach operating globally across multiple organisational types and industry verticals, I have witnessed countless times the power of coaching methodologies to elicit and catalyse pivots in mindset and profound changes in leadership behaviour.

But the centrality of the coaching intervention in this regard reinforces further the need to address the resource and sustainability challenges. Regardless of any cost-reduction mitigations, the established value-add of coaching requires active and urgent interventions to grow Africa's tiny coaching provision. This is not as simple as it may seem. Coach training capacity across the Continent is also woefully small. While it might be tempting to resort to adopting global training resources, it is crucial to acknowledge the essential need for cultural sensitivity in deploying coaching [15] and consequently in the training and resourcing of new professional coaches [16] [17].

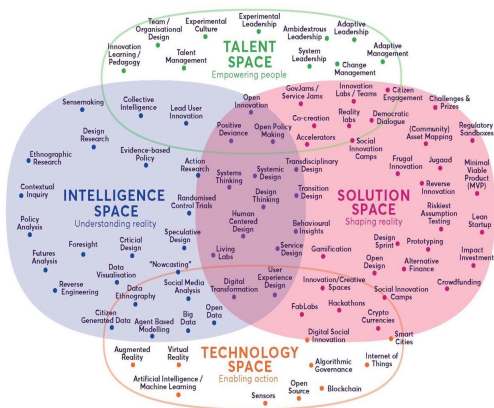
This relates closely to the challenges of **contextual complexity**. The impact of widely varying and often unspoken, inchoate cultural norms profoundly influence the effectiveness of capacity building initiatives. The temptation to treat Africa as a single cultural entity is prevalent among external consultants delivering capacity building initiatives, as is the tendency to deliver solutions from the Global North with little-to-no understanding of their appropriateness for the local context. For the twin capacity lenses to work optimally, contextual mapping is paramount. Stakeholder engagement, partnership working and co-creation will be key drivers of success in this regard.

African leaders resourced through such robust, yet nuanced capacity building initiatives will be equipped with the personal and competence attributes needed to embrace the challenges and opportunities of Africa’s emerging context with resilience and agility. One should not underestimate the dimensionality and complexity of attributes required of Africa’s future leaders many of which might conventionally have been overlooked. For example, the willingness to embrace failure as a learning resource [18], a radical embracing of emotional intelligence not as a ‘soft skill’ but as a rational driver for flourishing [19], the modelling of graced leadership [20] as a catalyst for high performance, and the adoption of an innovation mindset [21] to remain open to the opportunities for adaptation and change.

And African organisations of all types, guided by such insightful and resourceful leaders, will be better equipped to navigate the constraints of VUCA [22] and explore and exploit new opportunities. Such renewed organisations would, for example, seek to reframe challenges as opportunities [23], encourage systems thinking [24], manage change and transition with dignity and impact [25], reveal and remedy inappropriate sources of friction within the organisation [26] and explore the subtle interplay between the org chart and the work chart [27].

Beyond these profound consequences, such future leaders need to be well-equipped to deftly and impactfully navigate the emerging innovation landscape. To illustrate the complexity of this task, we might helpfully refer to a model of the innovation ecosystem developed by NESTA [28], the UK innovation agency for social good. In the model, NESTA helpfully gathers a representative sample of the vast array of tools and methods utilised to guide and shape innovation. Crucially, the model then portrays the methods operating over four domains:

- the technology space
- the solution space
- the intelligence space
- the talent space.



Perhaps the most significant value of this representation is not in the classification itself but in the challenge it inherently poses as to how we navigate the innovation ecosystem. In other words, how do we *navigate newness*?

It is instructive to consider conventional trajectories through the innovation space. Frequently people begin in the **technology space**. The narrative might be “there’s a great new piece of technology – we need that”. Or “we need AI”. Both may be true – but they may also be false. From the technology space, the transit is then made to the **solution space**. “What can we use this technology for?” If the predicate of the technology space is incorrect, the solutions posited in the solutions space might also be flawed. Then the transition to the **intelligence space** where the primal question is finally asked” “what is our reality?”; “what is the problem?”. Only then is the **talent space** explored, the very arena where the resource to best explore the intelligence and solution spaces in full context might be found.

This would be a typical trajectory followed in, say, digital transformation programs which example is very pertinent to the African innovation imperative. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the global failure rate of digital transformation programs is at least 70% [29] [30]. The failure to give priority to the problem definition is key. The NESTA trajectory is, in part, a restatement of the design thinking approach [31], though more nuanced and offering richer insights into the demands of leading innovation.

High-capacity, resourceful leaders have the insight to ask the pertinent questions about the nature of the innovation trajectory together with the leadership attributes to navigate it effectively.

**CONCLUSION**

As we have seen, capacity building, alongside skills development, is a vital and multifaceted process that requires careful attention to the diverse needs and challenges encountered in widely different contexts. The challenges are substantial, but the potential impacts are transformative.

Considerable further investigation is warranted to establish a robust portfolio of capacity building approaches that are tested as reliable and impactful within the wide array of African contexts. In particular, developing verifiable measures of ROI will be highly valuable in conveying the efficacy of such interventions.

The context of Rwanda, in which I’m now privileged to work as a partner, is a compelling exemplar – among others – of how careful and systemic attention to each of the factors above can be catalytic in delivering positive change for individuals and society.

Equipping the people of Africa is essential for growth. Growing our future digital leaders is essential for the Continent's sustained transformation.

Intentional capacity building can capitalise Africa's demographic dividend as a talent dividend which, in turn, can deliver a sustainable, bottom-line entrepreneurial dividend.

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