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What is Ubuntu?

Ubuntu is an age old African term for humaneness – for caring, sharing and being in harmony with all of creation. It promotes cooperation between individuals, cultures and nations and empowers all to be valued – to reach their full potential in accord with all around them.

Ubuntu is also about creating networks. The literal translation is “a person is a person through other people”. It is this message that supports and reinforces the value of maintaining balance and cooperation in the workplace and in our daily lives. Monica Knight became intrigued by the spirit of Ubuntu in its application in business systems of cooperation and interdependence in Africa. Desmond Tutu offered this insight on Ubuntu:

“It speaks to the very essence of being human...a person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others one does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed or treated as less than who they are”.

Monica values the link between Ubuntu and business. “Whatever is elemental to developing successful relationships is likely to also enhance business and community outcomes. I attribute my own success to Ubuntu expressed through the promotion of intrapreneurship. It is a way to enhance the prospects for entrepreneurial ventures to start and succeed, as well as a means to simultaneously build the spirit of community”.


The following is an excerpt from the foreword to Monica’s book *Dancing to Your Own Drum* by Betty Mutwiri:

Ubuntu is an experiential term – one that requires a deep appreciation of the virtues that form the soul’s foundation. The manifestation is then expressed seamlessly through the act of service.

My observations come from my experience growing up in Kenya, Africa. Local women leverage scarce resources and integrated their diverse strengths to create viable micro-enterprises. There weren’t any social programs so citizens had to pull up their bootstraps and respond to the growing needs. A strong foundation of common values was a prerequisite for success. Often through the leader’s/group of leaders intuitive process or by observing others working in various capacities, they identified complimentary strengths in others, formed allies and mobilized changes. In the absence of psychological and self-assessment instruments reveal a person’s skills, knowledge and attributes that is the norms in today’s business environment, common sense, wisdom and intuition prevailed.

Teambuilding was process of relationship building. This process was slow and deliberate. Getting to know the whole person allows for meaningful and effective communication decision making, negotiation and conflict resolution. Ultimate responsibility for the success of the project percolated through a process of interactions and dialogue whereby participants merged their individual meaning to a collective meaning. While the ‘Queen Bee’ had to provide the ultimate leadership, the ideas for implementation came from the whole. The whole process of building a hive was an evolution of an idea – each progressive step as reviewed to determine how the structure was doing before embarking on the next step. Members were always ‘checking in’ with each other during their daily interactions. Relationships were nurtured by daily acts of thoughtfulness, consideration and respect. This culture of mutuality creates and reinforces the commitment to a common future.





A compelling vision is a great driving force behind great accomplishments. The “buy in” from the members in a community does not come about as result of sophisticated Power Point presentation and marketing techniques. Buy-in is a natural outcome of having a common vision and the vision was inextricably tied to a legacy. It was understood that every action was a seed planted in the garden of life. What you sow today, you or your future generations would reap in due course. The vision of having future generations enjoy a better world was what motivated the people to transcend numerous societal barriers including colonialism and apartheid.

While it would be easy to classify Ubuntu as 'teamwork', it goes deeper than a commitment to getting along. It is a commonality of values and a commitment to a future that is a win-win for all involved. It requires each participant to examine his/her individual motivations and see if these align with the collective's. Once you begin to view yourself as an agent of change based on your natural or acquired skills and abilities, you begin to see how you fit into the larger picture. You act based on your core set of values; you find vision through service to your fellow human beings.

The concepts of Ubuntu can be applied to help people achieve real, authentic success in every area of life. In her hive enterprises, Monica Knight has introduced to participants the concept of Ubuntu in its most essential form. Success of the central enterprise feeds and nurtures the potential success of all associated enterprises. The spirit of cooperation and mutuality that underpins a hive structure is definitely Ubuntu and it is hard to imagine how such a business entity could survive, let alone thrive in North America without the spirit of caring with which these endeavors have been imbued through the philosophy of Ubuntu.