



## Agile leaders for Africa

### Effective leadership in challenging markets

Markets in Africa beckon innovative business leaders who can harness the potential of local resources to expand their organizations and realise new growth opportunities.

“Many countries in Africa have continued to show annual double digit growth,” says Sandra Burmeister, CEO of executive search firm Amrop Landelahni. “The top achievers, Angola, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, have achieved GDP gains of more than 50% over the five years from 2010 to 2014.

“However, strong headwinds following from the sustained economic crisis increase the complexity of doing business in Africa – and around the globe. This demands a new breed of leaders.

“In the face of geopolitical uncertainty, social upheaval and regulatory constraints, resilience and adaptability are the foremost abilities for leaders to be successful in African markets.”

While disruption or necessity may be the mother of invention, Burmeister believes it makes sense to plan for the unexpected, at least to the extent of putting in place a team that has the ability to innovate on the fly and to move fast in reacting to changing market conditions. “A new generation of managers needs to be developed by design, rather than by accident,” she says.

“We need to actively develop leaders who can flip business models on their head and embrace uncertainty. We need managers who can harness disruptive technology to build exponential companies set for high-velocity growth.

“Leadership means doing things differently, rather than relying on past comfortable ways of acting. It means being able to think on your feet, take a stand and take risks, while understanding that not all decisions will meet with success.

“However, in Africa and across the globe, such talents are in short supply.”

According to the 2015 PwC Global CEO Survey, 90% of CEOs across Africa are extremely concerned about the availability of key skills. This compares with a figure of 58% in Western Europe. Moreover, 98% of Africa’s CEOs are concerned about social instability, against 49% in Western Europe and North America.

Diversity and inclusion is a critical part of the CEO’s armoury to meet these challenges. PwC states: “Talent diversity ... is no longer seen as a soft issue. It’s now a core component of competitiveness – and 77% of CEOs have, or intend to adopt, a strategy that promotes it.” Most CEOs who have a diversity strategy say it has enhanced business performance and helped them compete in new geographies.

“Operating in Lagos is as different from running an office in Johannesburg as running an office in New York is from running one in Bangkok,” says Burmeister.

“Because of the diversity within the African continent, managers need to have empathy and be able to operate within the culture of the people with whom they work. And of course, the core abilities of strategic thinking, adaptability and decision making, along with integrity and humility – being willing to listen and learn – remain critical.



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“Curiosity and being open to new ideas is valuable, as is being agile enough to quickly detect and deflect threats and maximise opportunities. At the same time, leaders need to learn not to be distracted by the minutiae of management and instead track fast-paced and disruptive influences.”

However, Burmeister asks, are we growing the leaders we need to operate in markets without boundaries?

“The challenge lies with business schools and colleges – who tend to focus on the past rather than the future – and, of course, business itself. Corporations need to acknowledge uncertainty and grow leaders who can operate in ambiguity. Coaching must be honed to develop abilities needed to meet changing demands.

“Moreover, we must accurately assess people with the potential for leadership. In many cases, we are employing assessment methods that we used 50 years ago. These outdated tools are no longer relevant in pinpointing the right talent to develop. Finding, developing and engaging the next generation of leaders demands fresh models and new tools.

“Creating a robust leadership pipeline depends on the ability to identify people with the motivation and potential to become future leaders, accelerate the development of these high-potential candidates and prepare them for major change.”

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