

QuickView Leadership Series

Focus on South Africa

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What Makes a Leader Effective?

Generations in South Africa Weigh In

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Common wisdom suggests that the generations in South Africa are fundamentally different from one another. And certainly there are real differences – including the way they dress, the way they consume information, the music they listen to, and some of their ideas about appropriate personal behaviour. Based on these apparent differences, assumptions are made that the presence of more young people in the workplace will result in a substantial upheaval within organisations. And as the tide shifts, bringing more young people into the workplace as members of the older generations pursue retirement, will there need to be wholesale changes in how leaders need to behave to be effective? After all, if younger people are that different, perhaps leaders have to be different to lead effectively.

Who exactly are the generations currently in the workforce? And what do they really think makes a leader effective?

The (Currently Working) Generations in South Africa

Generations in South Africa have their own unique characteristics that arise from the unique culture, economics, and history of South Africa. Because the white and nonwhite populations were affected radically differently by the same social and political events, a white South African and a nonwhite South African may share a birth date and therefore be technically part of the same generation, yet may have different perspectives because of the different impacts the events had on the white and nonwhite populations. Below we try to address both perspectives.

Those born between 1938 and 1960 (called the Apartheid Generation, roughly equivalent to Baby Boomers) have no real memory of South Africa before apartheid was instituted¹. Apartheid was officially instituted in South Africa in 1948. The country was economically stable in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and there was substantial economic growth during the 1960s and 1970s. The increase in industrialisation resulted in an increase in both black and white South African incomes, and at the same time there was increasing resistance (both nonviolent and violent) to the apartheid regime. While all citizens may have known about protests against apartheid policies, nonwhites are likely to have been much more aware of the protests. Following the Sharpeville massacre (1960) there were mass imprisonments of black leaders within South Africa and an almost complete ban on nonwhite political movements.

What could be called the Struggle Generation (born 1961-1980; roughly equivalent to Gen Xers) is characterised by the Soweto uprisings (1976) and the struggle against apartheid². In the 1970s and 1980s, many countries imposed military and then economic sanctions against South Africa to protest the continuation of apartheid policies, reducing economic growth in South Africa. During this time there were increasingly violent protests against apartheid, and increasingly strong responses by the government against the protests. Both blacks and whites of this generation would have felt the impact of the economic sanctions. The first television broadcasts in South Africa happened in 1976 and undoubtedly had a substantial impact on this generation, but there was only one channel and it was controlled by the National Party and transmitted in Afrikaans. Despite the political upheaval, both the Apartheid and Struggle generations are perceived as being more accepting of authority than younger generations, and of having different beliefs about attributes of leaders than younger generations³.

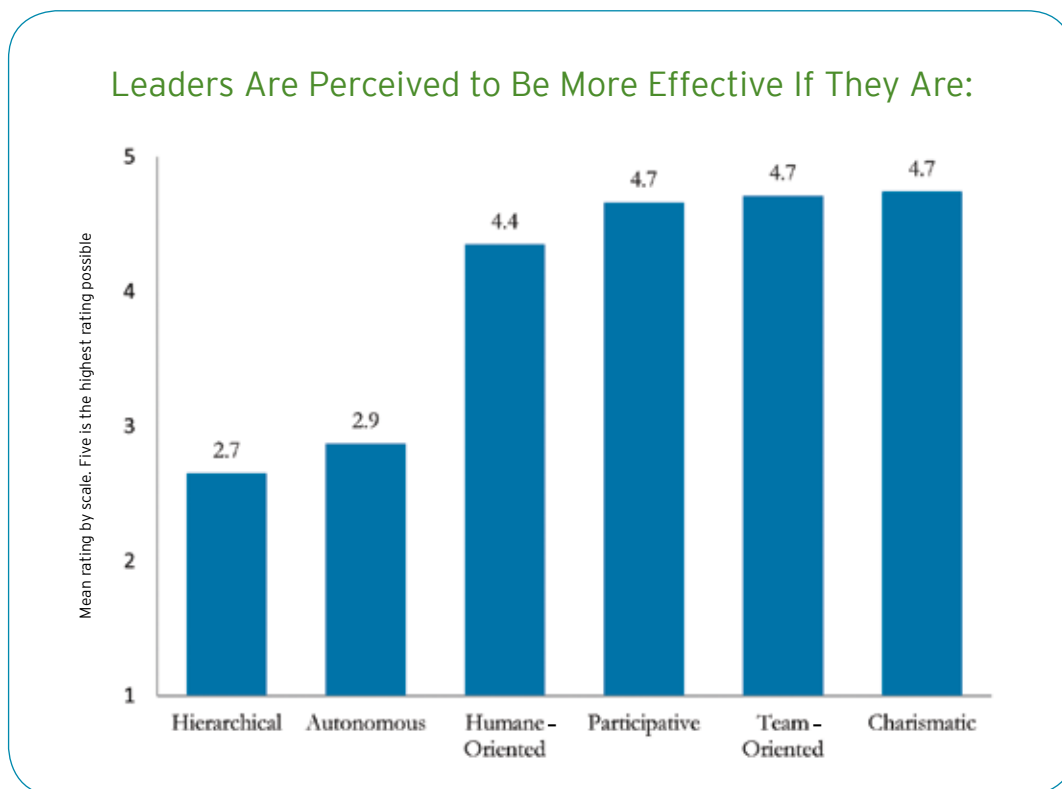
The Transition Generation are those born 1981-1993 (roughly equivalent to older Millennials). In the 1980s apartheid began to be dismantled with small steps (e.g., mixed race marriage was allowed). While their childhood was lived under apartheid, their adolescence was in a reformed democratic system. They came of age in a system without legal restrictions regarding how they could travel, work, live, or who they could marry. They have grown to adulthood exposed to democratic political processes, as well as to a broad range of international news and TV shows. This generation has experienced high levels of joblessness, but about the same levels of physical and economic insecurity as other generations. It is believed that the Transition Generation is less willing to comply with authority and has less positive opinions about leadership than earlier generations, perhaps because of their perceptions about the poor performance of government institutions in the last few years⁴.

The Free Generation (born 1994-2000; roughly equivalent to younger Millennials) are those who were born after the first democratic election, and who have no memory of living under apartheid⁵. Their experience of South Africa is one characterized by democratic political processes and integration with the larger world community via televisions and information technology. The oldest members of this generation are currently 17. Like the Transition Generation, it is believed that they have less positive opinions about authority and are less willing to comply with authority than older generations⁶.

Generational Cohorts												
Birth Years	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Approximate Current Ages as of 2013	68	63	58	53	48	43	38	33	28	23	18	13
	Apartheid Generation (1938-1960)				Struggle Generation (1961-1980)				Transition Generation (1981-1993)		Free Generation (1994-2000)	

What Do the Generations Think Makes a Leader Effective?

Overall, we find that all generations think leaders are effective when they are participative, team-oriented, charismatic, and humane-oriented, and are less sure that being hierarchical and autonomous makes a leader effective.

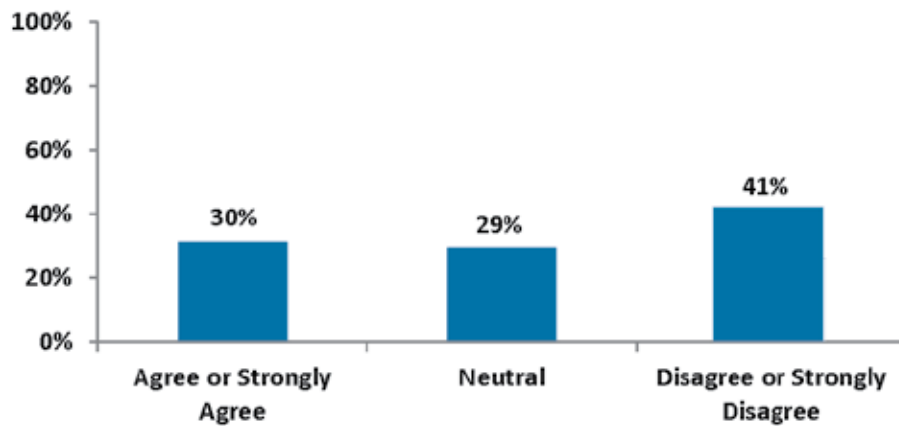


- **Hierarchical** leadership is characterized by placing importance on social rank, following tradition, and abiding by the rules.
- **Autonomous** leadership is characterized by self-reliance, and working and acting independently.
- **Humane-oriented** leadership is characterized by helping others, generosity, and compassion.
- **Participative** leadership is characterized by collaboration and inclusiveness.
- **Team-oriented** leadership is characterized by helping teams deal with conflict, working together, and developing cohesion.
- **Charismatic** leadership is characterized by strong enthusiasm, and by inspiring and motivating others.

Organisational Authority

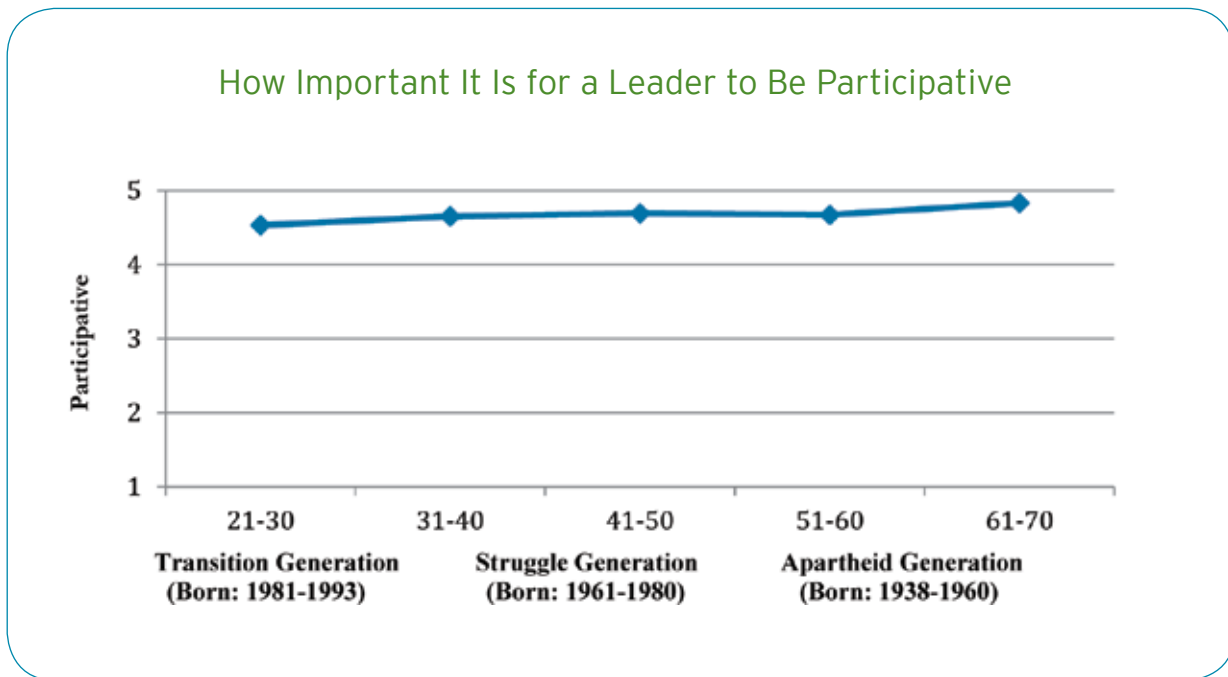
People of all generations expressed about the same lack of support for the importance of deference to organisational authority. Understanding how employees view organisational authority has important implications for organisations because it can impact how much they choose to comply with directives from their managers and other superiors. To some degree, compliance with authority is important for ensuring rules are followed and order is maintained. However, in some cases, questioning authority can be a healthy practice for organisations. For instance, having employees who are willing to question authority may prevent mistakes from happening or poor decisions from being made. The managers in the South Africa sample represent a wide range of perspectives regarding authority – but this pattern is similar across all generations.

“If Your Manager Tells You to Do Something, You Better Do It”



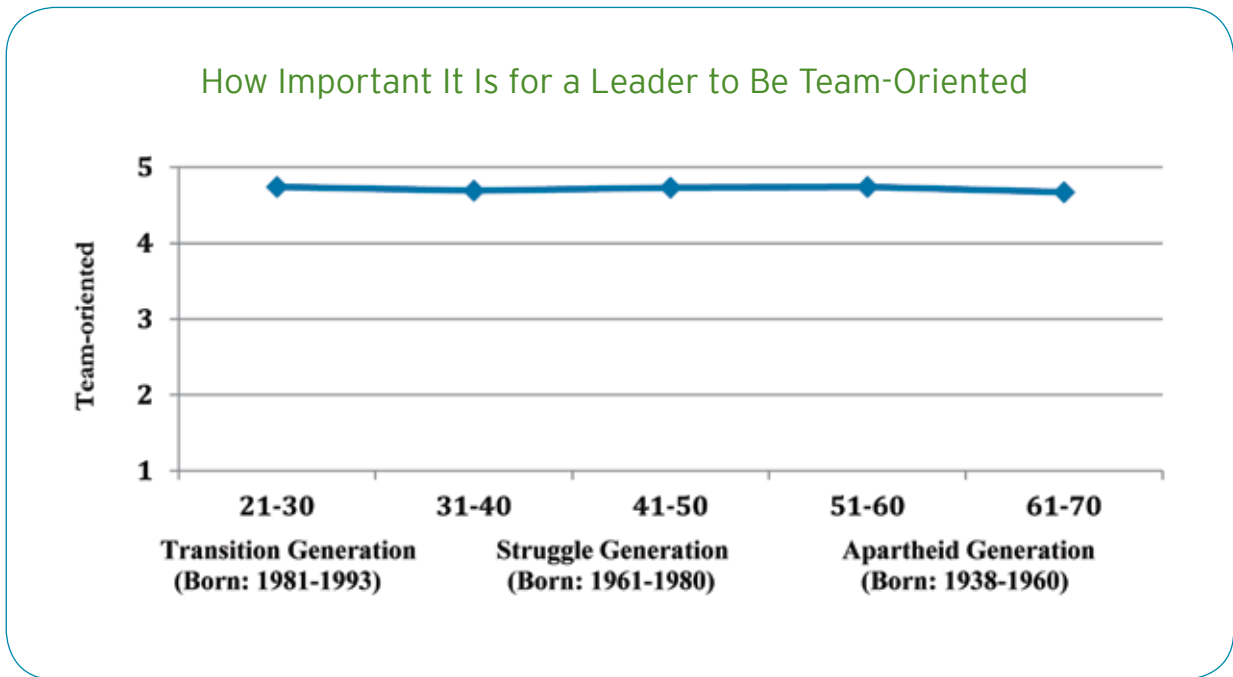
While the generations agreed that being participative, team-oriented, and charismatic are important for effective leadership, the generations differed somewhat in how important they thought each of these were.

In South Africa, older participants were more likely than younger respondents to say that being participative was important for effective leadership. This is directly contrary to the general perception that Gen Xers and Millennials are more focused on participative leadership than are Baby Boomers.

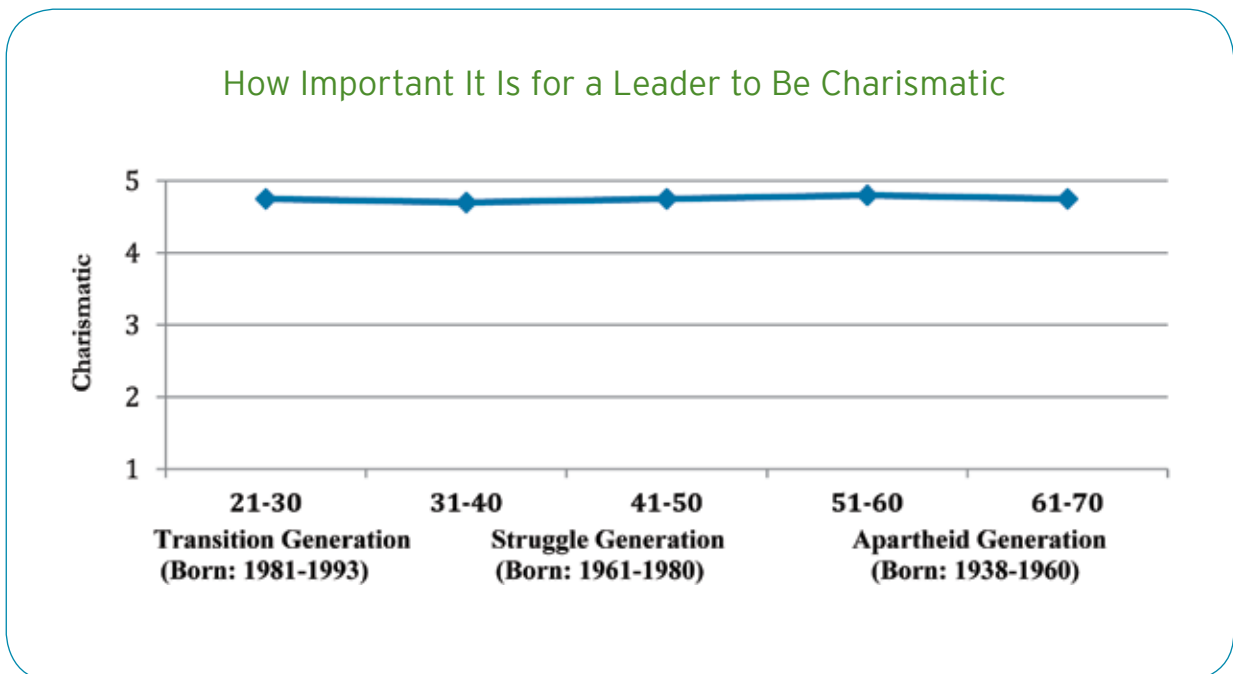


Older participants were more likely than younger respondents to say that being participative was important for effective leadership.

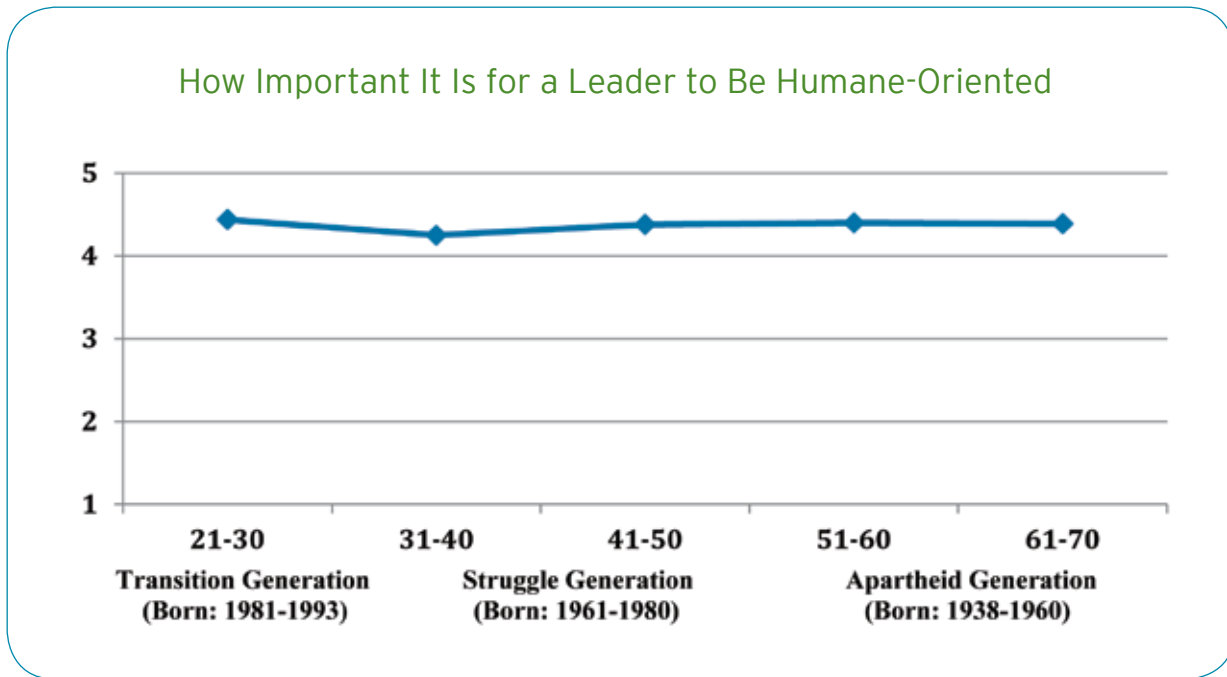
In contrast, younger and older respondents in South Africa all rated team-oriented leadership as about equally important.



The belief that being charismatic contributes to effective leadership is about the same for younger participants as it was for older participants in South Africa.



There is a similar pattern of results for humane-oriented leadership. Across age groups, this type of leadership is seen as highly related to effectiveness.



So to Be Effective, Leaders Should Be . . .

. . . participative, team-oriented, charismatic, and humane-oriented. They should not focus on being hierarchical and autonomous, and shouldn't make enforcing deference to organisational authority a priority. These preferences are true for people of all generations, and people of the different generations agree on how important they are. In other words, **contrary to popular belief, younger and older employees agree to the same degree on what makes a leader effective. Specifically, they believe that leaders who are participative, team-oriented, charismatic, and humane-oriented are effective.**

How Leaders Can Live Up to Managers' Expectations

Employees of all ages and at all levels believe that effective leaders are humane-oriented, participative, team-oriented, and charismatic. So, what should leaders be doing to live up to these expectations? At the core of what employees want to see in their leaders is consideration for others. Consideration is shown when leaders respect and invite others' opinions (participative), help teams work more effectively with one another (team-oriented), inspire and excite others to do their best work (charismatic), and help others at work (humane). So, in general, a good way to live up to these expectations is to demonstrate that you see value in others. Here are some more specific ideas:

- **To be more participative:** When making decisions about how work is done or how to handle a challenge, make it a habit to ask your team to suggest ideas⁷. Also, make sure that you're implementing others' ideas, not just your own. Encouraging suggestions and implementing others' ideas (when they are the better idea) demonstrates participative leadership.
- **To be more charismatic:** Charisma at work is often about others seeing how much enthusiasm you have for your work and the people you work with. Remember that emotions are contagious, so project the enthusiasm you feel, and that you want your teams to feel. Studies have shown that leaders who are perceived as positive are also perceived as being more effective⁸.
- **To be more team-oriented:** Schedule meeting agendas and team project timelines with a little bit of (we know, highly precious) time built in so there really is opportunity to talk about what is happening with the work the group is doing. Teams benefit if they have the time to support one another in addressing challenges, providing constructive feedback, reflecting on lessons learned, and celebrating accomplishments. Helping the team to connect in these ways will both make you more likely to be seen as a team-oriented leader, and your team will become more efficient and effective over time as they are better able to leverage their learning.
- **To be more humane-oriented:** Really think about what your subordinates and co-workers need, and how you can help them both work more effectively and achieve their goals. Be understanding when employees have personal conflicts that they have to deal with, even if it interferes with work. While it can be challenging to show compassion to a team member who unexpectedly has to attend to a personal need during an inopportune moment, with good employees it will pay off over time. High-performing employees who feel they have to make too many sacrifices for work or do not have the support needed when a personal situation arises will be dissatisfied and may disengage, or leave entirely⁹.

Conclusion

The practical implication of this is that organisations in South Africa should not focus their resources on tailoring leadership and management solutions to specific generations. Rather than spending time, energy, and funds on creating solutions to generational differences in leadership that do not appear to exist, organisations should instead focus on helping all leaders learn how to be more participative, humane-oriented, charismatic, and team-oriented, and to be less autonomous and hierarchical, which people of all generations will appreciate.

For a more in-depth analysis, please see: "Perceptions of authority and leadership: A cross-national, cross-generational investigation" by Jennifer J. Deal, Sarah Stawiski, Laura M. Graves, William A. Gentry, Marian Ruderman, and Todd J. Weber, in *Managing the New Workforce: International Perspectives on the Millennial Generation* (2012), Eddy S. Ng, Sean T. Lyons, and Linda Schweitzer, Eds., Edward Elgar Publishers.

Sample

The World Leadership Survey has continued to collect data online since its inception in March 2008. Participants in the research come through partner organisations, interested individuals, and enrolment in CCL programmes.

Participants fill out a survey online that is hosted by Clear Picture Corporation and takes them approximately 20 minutes to complete. In thanks for their participation, participants receive a free CCL Guidebook to download immediately upon completion of the survey. Questions about the survey are sent to the World Leadership Survey e-mail account at WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org.

The sample included 289 respondents native to South Africa. Of the respondents reporting race, the majority (58.8%) were White, 15.2% were Black, 3.8% Asian, 5.2% Multiracial, and 6.9% reported "Other." The respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 71 with a mean age of 44. The South Africa sample also had a range of education levels represented, with 23.5% having a high school education, 33.5% having a Bachelor's degree, and 41.1% reporting having a graduate or professional degree. The remainder of the respondents reported "Other" (1.9%).

It is important to note that this is not a random sample of leaders in managers or employees in South Africa, and therefore it is likely not fully representative of the working population. Our sample consists of people who are employed, are currently proactively working on their own development, and who were willing to take 20 minutes of their own time to participate. Though it is not a representative sample, it is a good sample of managers and professionals at higher levels in organisations who are currently employed and are engaged in improving their work skills. They offer insight into how people who are either in current leadership roles or have aspirations for leadership roles think about life in organisations.

Endnotes

^{1,2,3,4,6} Mattes, R. (2011). *The "born frees": The prospects for generational change in post-apartheid South Africa* (Working Paper No. 131). Retrieved May 21, 2012, from <http://afrobarometer.org>.

⁵ Apartheid was officially dismantled in 1992, and the first general elections with universal suffrage occurred in 1994.

⁷ http://www.drru-research.org/data/resources/19/Hillebrandt_Sebastian_Blakemore_2011_Cog_Neuro.pdf

⁸ Bono, J.E., & Ilies, R. (2006). Charisma, positive emotions and mood contagion. *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 16, pp. 317-334.

⁹ Eisenberg, N., Smith, C.L., Sadovsky, A., & Spinrad, T.L. (2004). Effortful control. In R.F. Baumeister & K.D. Vohs (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 259-282). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

About the Authors

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