

WHITE PAPER

# Leadership Development in Africa

## A Focus on Strengths

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## Contents

Executive Summary	1
Leadership in Africa	2
The Strengths of Leaders in West Africa, Southern Africa, and Egypt	4
Risk Factors for Leaders in Africa	9
Developing Leadership Strengths	11
Outlook	14
Further Reading	16
About the Authors	17

# Executive Summary

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Through its research and leadership development programs, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) works with some of the largest and most successful organizations in Africa. We've found that many organizations are investing in both new and experienced managers who can help promote growth and build capacity. The ability to attract and retain effective leaders, though, depends on how each organization develops and sustains its leadership talent.

**There is no doubt that the need for effective leadership in Africa is high.** But traditionally, talented leaders have not received much structured support for developing their full leadership potential. For this reason, many organizations in Africa are underperforming. By strengthening leadership skills, they could improve their business results and strengthen their prospects for sustainable growth and prosperity.

Many African organizations, especially those on the verge of becoming multinational or international in scope, find that their leadership challenges are plenty and complex. CCL's research and leadership development initiatives show there is hope. Leaders can exceed their current levels of performance by developing their untapped potential—ensuring that their organizations are not just adapting to global change, but are **effectively using change to their advantage.**

In this white paper, we focus on the strengths of leaders in three regions of Africa (Southern Africa, West Africa, and Egypt) and highlight the regional differences our research has uncovered. We also **outline an effective approach to leadership development that benefits both leaders and organizations alike.** It is being used successfully by CCL in more than 100 countries around the world.



## Leadership in Africa

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*“A leader . . . is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”*

*Nelson Mandela*

**Africa has traditionally been the cradle of great leadership.** Many African leaders are well known around the world—including Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Steve Biko, and Julius Nyerere to name a few.

Africa’s contribution to leadership philosophy has also been remarkable. Two examples: Africa was the birthplace of Ubuntu—the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. It also gave rise to Satyagraha and the notion of passive resistance, which Gandhi developed while living in Africa. Both are known around the world.

Today, though, the **demand for effective leadership and systematic leadership development in Africa is growing more rapidly than ever before.** A critical shortage of upcoming leaders is responsible for the underdevelopment of organizations in many African countries (Ugwuegbu, 2001). They are underperforming compared to their potential and could improve their performance by strengthening their leadership.

*“While business leaders in Africa today are excited by the many opportunities we see on our continent, tapping into these opportunities requires significant skill. As international companies rush to conquer this new frontier, being internationally competitive and world-class is an absolute requirement. Developing appropriate offerings, mobilizing staff, and aligning business partners in different countries adds complexity at all levels of leadership. Preparing the organization for the leadership challenges of tomorrow is the chief concern of CEOs in ambitious organizations.”*

*Leon Vermaak  
CEO, Telesure*

What leadership skills do organizations need to deal with the complex challenges they face? Managers participating in one of CCL's Leadership Forums in Africa identified the following leadership challenges:

- Leading diverse teams
- Being adaptable to the changing world of work
- Being able to look at ourselves, be vulnerable, and reflect on development areas
- Transferring knowledge and coaching subordinates
- Encouraging collaboration and communication
- Orchestrating employee engagement
- Dealing with complexity

CCL believes these critical skills can be developed and can help unlock the leadership potential in organizations throughout Africa and beyond.

*“Organizations are all the time challenged by market dynamics—lots of changes, fierce competition, technological evolutions. A major attribute that makes an organization stand out is the quality of leadership, which can drive up both personal and corporate performance. That’s why investment in management and leadership is a crucial mandate for success and sustainability.”*

*Dalia Esmat  
Head of Training and Development  
Mobinil*

# The Strengths of Leaders in West Africa, Southern Africa, and Egypt

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While leadership is important everywhere in the world, the way that people actually lead can differ by region. Many researchers have examined what good leadership looks like in Western cultures, but leadership in most of Africa has not been explored in much depth. What we do know is that **ideas about leadership are tied to culture, religion, educational background, and language.**

Leadership philosophies like Ubuntu allude to a feeling of high responsibility for one's kin, loyalty to one's ethnic or family group, and a focus on

long-term prosperity. A previous study looking at leadership in Botswana showed leaders there tended to provide clear direction and targets, and they exhibited a paternal and supportive leadership style. However, we know little about leadership in other regions or countries in Africa. As a result, CCL decided to investigate how leaders in Egypt, West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso), and Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Namibia) are seen by others, and where their strengths and potential weaknesses lie.

## Methodology

Data for this analysis is drawn from BENCHMARKS<sup>®</sup>, a 360-degree feedback instrument developed by the Center for Creative Leadership. BENCHMARKS<sup>®</sup> is a well-validated tool that rates managers on 16 dimensions of effective leadership and on five factors CCL research shows are predictive of whether a manager's career will derail. Managers rate themselves and are rated by their bosses, peers, superiors, direct reports, and relevant others.

For this study, we analyzed data from leaders in three parts of Africa. Included were 183 managers and 1,475 raters in Egypt, 143 managers and 1,140 raters in Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Namibia), and 55 managers and 499 raters in Western Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso). Most managers took the BENCHMARKS<sup>®</sup> assessment as part of their leadership development program at the Center for Creative Leadership. All agreed for their data to be used anonymously for this research.

We calculated an average rating for each individual to balance out the perspectives of the bosses, managers, employees, and others who submitted ratings. When we compared individual ratings across the three regions, we found statistically significant differences in 15 of the 21 dimensions assessed by BENCHMARKS<sup>®</sup>.



As CCL researchers analyzed the data, we looked first at the rank order of leadership competencies by strength in the three regions. The results of this are shown in Table 1. Rather than expressing the importance of a competence, this rank order is linked to how well the average leader from each region was rated on each competency.

Although the rankings showed some variation, leaders in each of the three regions got their highest scores on the same five competencies. **In all three African regions, leaders were seen as highly skilled at putting other people at ease, being fast and agile learners, and leading in diverse environments. They were also seen as resourceful and able to find creative solutions to problems, and as having a high focus on outcomes and getting things done.** While the exact rank order for these five competencies varies by region, these are the same five characteristics our research shows are most highly ranked in other countries around the globe as well.

When it comes to the other leadership competencies in our study, we found there were some regional differences of significance. For example, decisiveness, straightforwardness, and composure were not ranked as strengths in Egypt and West Africa, while in Southern Africa, these competencies were ranked relatively highly.

Rank order of average performance in leadership competencies in three African regions. Competencies with the highest rank-differences across the three regions are highlighted in red.

Table 1

Leadership Competencies	Southern Africa	Egypt	West Africa	Europe (for comparison only)
Putting people at ease	1	2	4	4
Being a quick study	2	3	2	1
Differences matter	3	1	5	2
Resourcefulness	4	4	1	3
Doing whatever it takes	5	5	3	5
Change management	6	9	7	8
Decisiveness	7	13	10	6
Building and mending relationships	8	7	6	9
Straightforwardness and composure	9	14	8	7
Participative management	10	8	11	10
Compassion and sensitivity	11	6	12	11
Career management	12	12	14	12
Self-awareness	13	10	13	12
Leading employees	14	9	11	14
Balance between personal life and work	15	16	16	15
Confronting problem employees	16	15	15	16

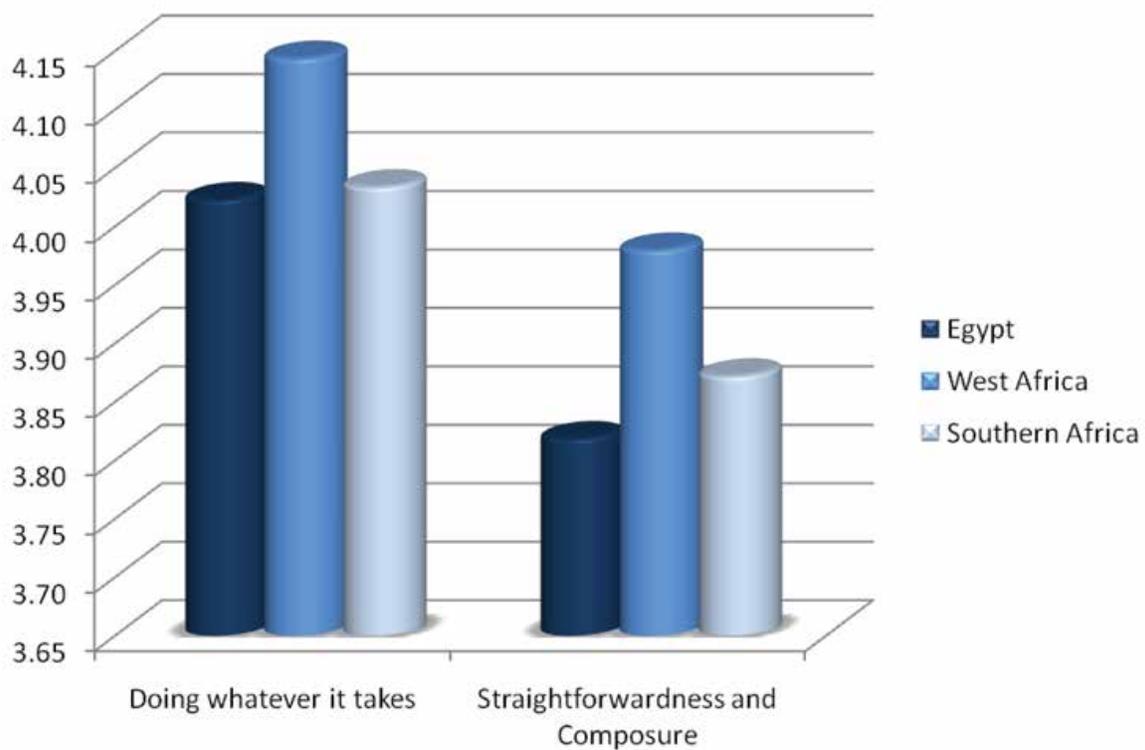
*“It is unfortunate that the leadership in Africa is far too often presented to the world in the form of dysfunctional and derailed leadership. Africa has an abundance of sound and responsible leaders on all levels and dimensions of society. These leaders need to emerge and become visible. Leadership development is a key leverage point in the development and transformation of our beautiful continent.”*

*Frik Landman  
CEO, University of Stellenbosch  
Executive Development Ltd.*

## Regional Differences in Strengths

When contrasting leaders Egypt, West Africa and Southern Africa, we found they differ in many dimensions of leadership. The largest differences are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Leaders in West Africa were seen as being more ready to “Do whatever it takes” to produce results. They were also rated higher in “Straightforwardness and Composure,” showing more calmness in times of change and crisis, contributing more to solving problems than to complaining about them, and tending to be patient and resilient when tempers run high.

# Risk Factors for Leaders in Africa

What happens when a professional who is a great team player and very loyal is promoted to team leader because of those very qualities? Amr suddenly found himself in that position and had trouble adjusting to his new responsibilities. Though he closely identified with his organization and worked hard to ensure the company's success, he had never chosen or built a staff. He found it difficult to manage conflicts among diverse team members and was relieved when some of them decided to leave. Amr successfully hired new team members who seemed a good fit. Over the next five years, his team exhibited average to good performance and remained virtually conflict free.

Amr thought he deserved another promotion. However, his boss told him the management team didn't see him taking on more responsibility. They found he was too concerned with ensuring harmony and steady performance. To move to a higher level, he needed an appreciation for different viewpoints, tough decisionmaking skills to promote strategic change, and a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. These were skills that didn't match Amr's strengths. He was disappointed and felt his efforts weren't honored. He didn't want to leave the organization but didn't know how to become a leader ready to move up to the next level.

Amr's story highlights how a leader can stall, hit a plateau, and derail from an expected career progression. CCL has conducted extensive research to understand the factors that contribute to derailment and how managers can learn to avoid them. Five key characteristics have been observed in derailed executives in Africa and various countries around the globe that predict leaders' derailment. CCL researchers calculated a rank-order for the derailment risk of African leaders on these five factors. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Risks for Derailment	Southern Africa	Egypt	West Africa	Europe (for comparison only)
Too narrow functional orientation	1	2	4	4
Difficulty building and leading a team	2	3	2	1
Failure to meet business objectives	3	1	5	2
Problems with interpersonal relationships	4	4	1	3
Difficulty changing and adapting	5	5	3	5

Rank order of derailment risk factors in three African regions. A higher rank (1 or 2) indicates a leader is seen as more likely to derail because of this factor.

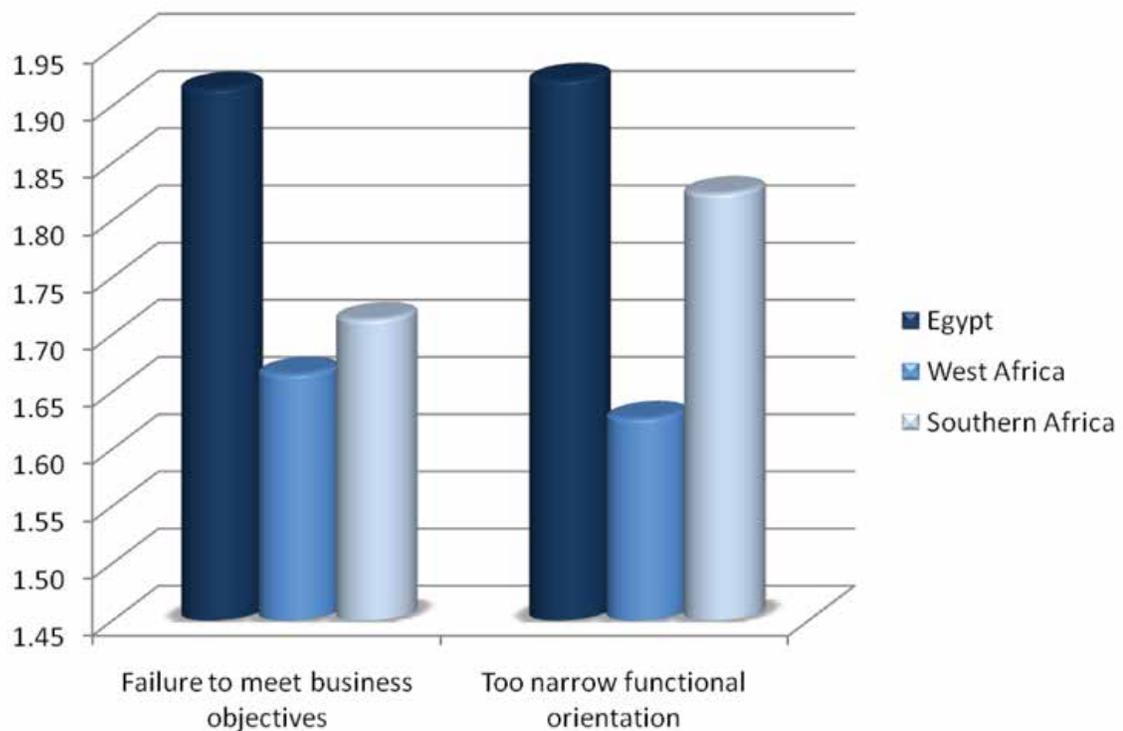
*“Looking at the Middle East, leadership more often comes across as a “one-man show” rather than a reflection of teamwork and collaboration . . . Our Education System promotes individualism and most of the workplace culture revolves around recognizing and rewarding individual achievement rather than team achievement. This in turn results in staff working in isolated islands rather than working together to achieve a common goal.”*

*Mohamed Farouk Hafeez  
Secretary General & Board Member, Future Generation Foundation*

## Regional Differences in Risk Factors

African leaders overall scored very low for derailment factors, showing that most were unlikely to stagnate or derail in their careers. However, it was interesting to see that ratings differed across the three regions. The largest differences are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2



In Egypt and Southern Africa, an overly narrow functional orientation was seen as the most likely derailment factor. This suggests that some leaders might have trouble thinking “outside the box” of their own department, line of business, or function in order to connect to the bigger, more strategic mission of the organization. In West Africa, on the other hand, some leaders exhibit an inability to effectively build and lead a team, which could easily derail them from their career track. Mining further into the regional scores, leaders in Egypt were seen as more likely to fail to meet business objectives and to develop a narrow, functional orientation. In contrast, leaders in West Africa appeared much less likely to develop a narrow, functional orientation.

## Developing Leadership Strengths

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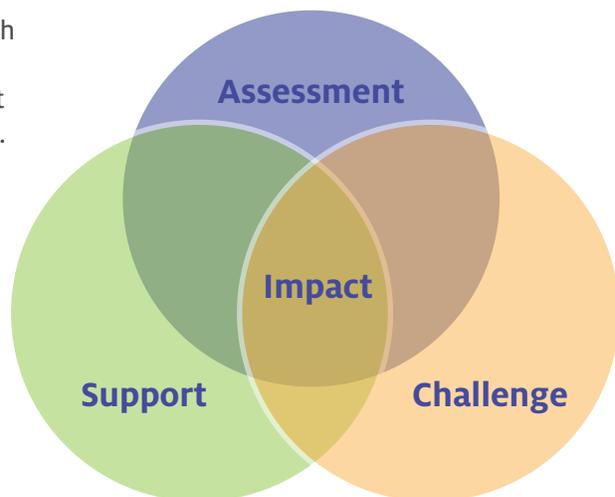
Anita grew up in Pretoria when there were not many jobs. As a result, she developed a belief that work is a privilege. She accepted the first job she was offered right out of college, and for 30 years dedicated herself to her job and the company. She takes her work very seriously and has a sense of duty and obligation that she feels is honored by her company and shows in the progress she has made over the years. Recently, she had problems motivating young new hires in her department to work longer hours if deadlines required it. She was disappointed with her staff and felt they didn't appreciate the importance of loyalty and dedication. During a leadership development opportunity provided

by her company, Anita learned to understand her employees' perspective on work and their perception of her as a leader. She realized she had assumed that her strength—a high degree of loyalty towards her organization—could be generalized to other generations. She reflected on how societal dynamics are expressed in her everyday work and decided she would use them positively, rather than try to fight them. Now Anita is spending more time with each individual employee, working out what motivates them and making a point of giving more feedback than before. She has observed there is less resistance now when it comes to the extra effort required to achieve deadlines.

We know leaders learn first and foremost from their experiences. But not all experiences are equally developmental. A new job, a complex project or a different location represents a much more powerful learning experience than doing the same type of work, with the same people, in the same organization. A boss who gives a lot of constructive feedback is more useful for development than a boss who does not give feedback. This perspective is reflected in CCL's research findings, which firmly establish that **challenging work assignments and a variety of rich, on-the-job experiences are important to leadership development** (McCauley, 2006).

## Developing through Assessment—Challenge—Support

To develop leadership skills, CCL uses an Assessment, Challenge, and Support model that is based on our research into how leaders actually learn and develop. We have found that for meaningful impact, leadership development opportunities must integrate each of these three elements.



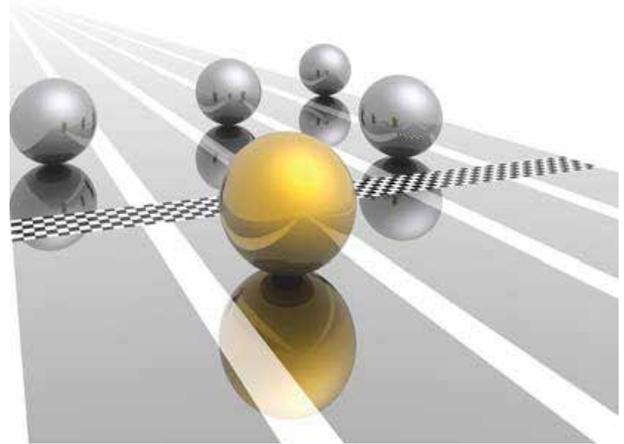
**Assessment** speaks to our desire to close the gap between what we would like to be (ideal self) and who we really are (actual self). This step in the process provides clarity about the development that needs to be done and identifies personal strengths and weaknesses.

The **Challenge** step motivates leaders to continue their development by encouraging them to experiment, practice and refine new skills, and to explore different perspectives. Effective challenges are stimulating rather than daunting and allow some room for failure.

Finally, the **Support** step builds a leader's confidence in the ability to learn and grow and emphasizes that developmental change is positive. Those around us can help to clarify and confirm what we've learned through assessment and challenge. Indeed, CCL research and programs show that receiving feedback and experiencing job challenges are developmental only when leaders receive adequate support from their bosses, organizations, or other sources. In other words, support is what makes assessment and challenge developmental. But neither support alone, nor challenge or assessment alone, can give someone what they need to develop leadership ability. The right balance of all three components is needed.

*“Africa faces many challenges—social, economic, governance—and it has been said that a true leader addresses the issues of his/her time. It is for this reason that I believe it an imperative for Africa to invest wisely in its future by developing leaders with the capacity to face these challenges and take Africa and her people to the next level.”*

*Vanessa Otto-Mentz  
Head, Santam Strategy Unit Santam*



## Overplaying Strengths Can Turn Them into Weaknesses

**Strengths and weaknesses are often two sides of the same issue.** Developing strengths can help managers excel as leaders; however, focusing solely on strengths—as our derailment research has shown—will not be enough to ensure that leaders improve their performance in all situations. If leaders overplay their strengths, they risk relying on routine skills and behaviors—the things they already know and the ways they are comfortable with—instead of developing other strengths and moving out of their comfort zone. By using the same strengths, the same behaviors, skills, and strategies over and over again, leaders might disregard the changing demands of new situations and developments and fail to rethink strategy and behavior accordingly. If they fail to develop the skills necessary to lead on higher levels and guide the organization into the future, their chances of derailment increase.

In our work with leaders from around the globe, CCL often finds that managers are most concerned about their performance in those areas they see as important. Because they are worried about not being good enough in these areas, they discount feedback or objective information, even if it is positive. Instead, they try even harder and overcompensate. They often **fail to appreciate how good they really are and are unaware that they are using their strengths too often, too much, and inappropriately.**

Strengths, when being taken to the extreme, become weaknesses. Effective leadership development enables leaders to modulate their strengths and become selective in when to use them.

*“There is a need for leadership development in corporate Southern Africa, emphasizing the importance of teamwork, management for results, and speed/excellence in execution. Training for this continues to be critical. 360-degree feedback from the manager, peers, and subordinates is a very good way to build awareness of your leadership style as perceived by others, as well as your development opportunities.*”

*Focus in Southern Africa should continue to be behind building talent. Leadership is such an important part of that focus. Providing stretch assignments to individuals with potential should be complemented by giving them the tools to grow in their roles.”*

*Miguel de Gracia  
Group General Manager, South & East Africa  
SC Johnson*

# Outlook

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Leadership is one of the most critical factors for the future success of organizations in Africa.

**Organizations that invest in developing leadership talent are investing in their future.**

In this white paper, we have examined the strengths and risk factors for leaders in three regions of Africa. We also have shown how effective leadership development can build the skills needed to lead other people, departments, and organizations more successfully. Leaders need to update their skills continually, yet also need to appreciate their strengths. If they don't, they could waste time and effort attempting to get better at leadership skills they have already mastered. They could fail to leverage core skills that would help them be more successful or waste time and effort trying to develop in an area that for them may be out of reach.

Making a strategic investment in the quality and quantity of leadership capacity can help organizations deal with important challenges and ensure that they have the capability to not only survive in a multinational environment, but to anticipate developments in their industry and to **use change as a strategic advantage.**



## Further Reading

Kaiser, R. B., and White, R. P. (2008). Strength test: Debunking an unbalanced approach to development. *Leadership in Action*, 28(5), 8–12. (Available from [www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org))

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## About the Authors

**Regina Eckert, PhD**, is a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) senior research associate in the EMEA region. Her work focuses on leadership, careers and diversity, including gender, ethnic and cultural diversity. Currently she is managing research projects that explore managerial careers in 21st century Europe and 360-degree feedback for development in multinational work environments. She works at the intersection of science and practice, publishing and presenting her work for academic and practitioner audiences worldwide. Regina's writings are featured in CCL's *Handbook of Leadership Development* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). Prior to joining CCL, Regina consulted with companies across Europe in the automotive, healthcare, manufacturing, and food industries on projects of diversity and career progression, organizational culture change, expatriate coaching, and team-based management. She holds a degree in psychology from the University of Munich, Germany, and a PhD in management from Aston Business School, UK.

**Simon Rweyongoza** is the Center for Creative Leadership's former regional director for Sub-Saharan Africa. His key responsibilities included providing regional management for CCL's work in the region, strategic client-relationship management to clients across a range of industries and sectors and assisting with developing the Center's presence in Africa. At CCL, Simon worked in Assessments Operations, Client Solutions, Operations and with the Leadership Beyond Boundaries initiative. He held positions as a client solutions operations associate, client-solutions project manager, and key account manager in CCL's EMEA region, providing creative approaches and support for the delivery of successful, high-quality interventions for global companies in a variety of business sectors. Born in Tanzania and holding dual Tanzanian and Belgian citizenship, Simon has worked across Europe and Africa. His areas of expertise and interest include leadership development, innovation, diversity, international development, and facilitating youth leadership workshops.

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