

The Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework

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Abstract

Purpose – Lean implementations have a low success rate due to various reasons, like misunderstanding Lean and cultural differences in implementing Lean outside of Japan. Researchers suggested created cultural adaptation of Lean for improve buy-in of employees and high success rates during Lean implementations. Thus, this study aims to delve into the similarities between Lean leadership and Ubuntu leadership to propose a South African Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review was used to collect data on Ubuntu leadership. Thereafter, the Lean leadership style was compared to the Ubuntu leadership style to find similarities and differences.

Findings – Thereafter, the correlations and variations between Lean and Ubuntu leadership principles were amalgamated in the design of a South African Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework.

Research limitations/implications – This study focused on the development of a literature-based framework; however, it is recommended that future studies validate the model by practical implementation in South African organisations. Additionally, this framework is limited to a South African cultural adaptation of Lean leadership; it is suggested that future studies explore other cultural adaptations in other countries.

Practical implications – Both Ubuntu and Lean philosophies teach the importance of people and team members; by using this framework organisations have a better opportunity to engage with employees and help them better understand Lean during the implementation stages, thereby increasing the chances of employee buy-in and bridging the gap to a brighter South Africa.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to propose a South African Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework.

Keywords Lean leadership, South Africa, Ubuntu leadership, Systematic literature review, Literature-based framework

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The Lean philosophy is well-established and known for its continuous improvement approach to operational excellence (Stone, 2012). This global phenomenon has been researched in various directions and sub-categories of Lean. However, the most prevalent fact in research is the low success rates and/or implementation challenges. According to Miina (2012), only about 10% of Lean implementation projects are done successfully, implying that approximately 90% of Lean implementation projects fail due to a multitude of



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reasons. As a result, several authors have uncovered that misunderstanding Lean is one of the main contributors to the low success rate (Nordin *et al.*, 2012; Bamber and Dale, 2000; Bhasin, 2011; Bonavia and Marin, 2006; Crute *et al.*, 2003; Lee-Mortimer, 2008; Wong *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, some researchers suggest that cultural differences may also contribute to low success rates due to Lean originating and being deeply rooted in Japanese culture (Melton, 2005; Worley and Doolen, 2006; Danese *et al.*, 2018; Hoogvelt and Yuasa, 1994). To structure future research around this, Ahmad (2013) put forward a framework that depicts the need for cultural adaptations of Lean implementation plans.

Based on the aforementioned, South African researchers have explored the idea of using a native management philosophy, Ubuntu, in correlation with Lean to bridge the gap in cultural differences and mitigate misunderstanding Lean to increase Lean implementation success rates (Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee, 2022). Ubuntu is the ancient indigenous African concept of “Humanness” or what it means to be human (Broodryk, 2007; Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee, 2022; Karsten and Illa, 2005; Bolden, 2014; Kelly, 2018; Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013; Mbigi, 1997; Msila, 2015; VA Heerden, 1998; Mangena, 2016; Muxe Nkondo, 2007). This research led to the development of a literature-based framework that allows for the “translation” of Lean concepts into the South African context. As, various South African organisations have low success rates with Lean implementation projects.

In a similar vein, it is worth exploring the cultural adaptations needed for successful Lean leadership implementation. The current South African Lean leadership frameworks focus on specific industries and areas like the supply chain and automotive industry (Msibi, 2019; VA Der Merwe, 2016), with a lack of a general framework for any industry. Moreover, there is a lack of studies on Lean leadership in South Africa since 2020. Ergo, this study aims to delve into the similarities between Lean leadership and Ubuntu leadership to propose a South African Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework.

2. Background

There is an African proverb that says: “If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together”. This proverb sheds light on the need for evolved leadership in the 21st century, where it is about how leaders can take their team, department and company to a better place such that they can all succeed together (Balle *et al.*, 2015). Deshwal and Ali (2020) explain that leadership is a process whereby someone makes use of the skillset and know-how to lead and bring a group of employees in the desired direction that is required for their organisation’s goal and objectives to be met. However, Balle *et al.* (2015) suggest that in today’s fluid hyper-connected world, the aim of leadership is no longer to create a following but rather to develop more leaders. This leans into the idea of Lean leadership, which is employee focused.

2.1 Lean leadership

The growing Lean body of research shows that to increase Lean implementation success rates, organisations must fully commit to Lean as a cultural transformation, guided by leadership that drives and maintains the change (Aij *et al.*, 2015b; Aij *et al.*, 2015a; Al-Balushi *et al.*, 2014; Dombrowski and Mielke, 2014; Ghosh and Sobek II, 2015; Netland *et al.*, 2020; Holmemo *et al.*, 2023; Santos *et al.*, 2024). Lean leadership is a hallmark of the Toyota Production System and is akin to its success in pioneering Lean (Liker and Convis, 2012). Lean leadership is a systematic method for the successful implementation and continuous improvement of Lean philosophy (Liker and Convis, 2012; Dombrowski and Mielke, 2014; Dombrowski and Mielke, 2013; Santos *et al.*, 2024; Holmemo *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it encapsulates the co-operation of employees and leaders in their mutual

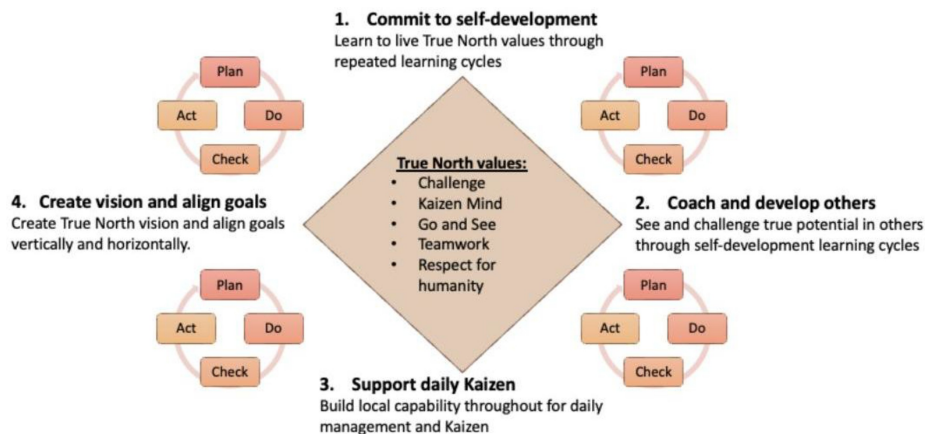
striving for perfection, which entails a customer focus of all processes and the long-term development of leaders and employees (Liker and Convis, 2012; Dombrowski and Mielke, 2014; Dombrowski and Mielke, 2013).

Liker and Convis (2012) explain that leaders must first develop themselves to a certain level before they can take responsibility for developing others and lead the organisation towards achieving challenging goals in the Toyota way. This development of Lean leaders happens in four stages and pivots around the core values of the bedrock of Toyota leadership (Liker and Convis, 2012); this is depicted in the diamond model of Lean leadership development in Figure 1.

Dombrowski and Mielke (2014) built on the work presented in Figure 1 and explained that the missing link between Lean tools and sustainable continuous improvement within organisations is Lean leadership. This led to the development of 15 rules for a sustainable Lean implementation in terms of Lean leadership (Dombrowski and Mielke, 2014). The fundamental principles of Lean leadership and their corresponding rules are illustrated in Figure 2.

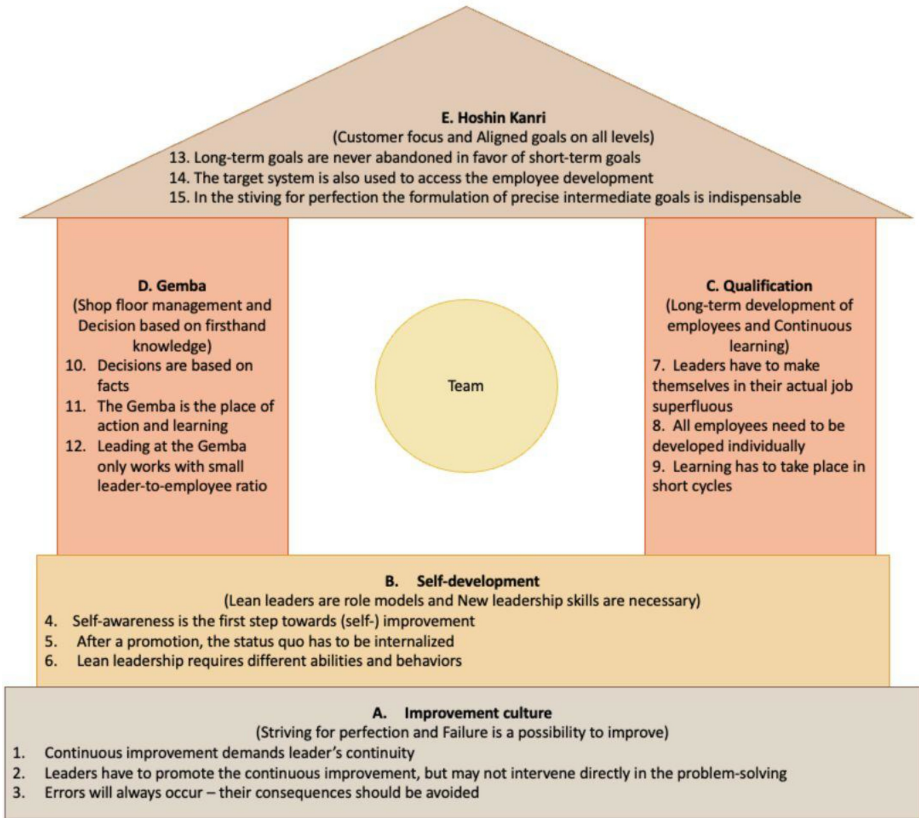
From Figure 2, the five principles of Lean leadership can be seen in Blocks A to E, along with their corresponding rules for sustainable Lean implementation. Based on the findings presented in Figure 2, Aij *et al.* (2015b) conducted a study to provide insight into the attributes and characteristics of effective Lean leaders. While their study was focused on health care, their findings can be generalised to Lean organisations. It was found that the following attributes are needed for each of the Lean leadership principles (Aij *et al.*, 2015b):

- *Improvement culture* – Task identity, feedback, autonomy, belief in improvement and honesty were identified as attributes of Lean leaders. These emphasise the need for leaders to recognise the importance of involving employees in Lean initiatives, to embrace improvement plans themselves and to honestly recognise failure and see it as an opportunity for improvement.
- *Self-development* – Show interest, facilitate resources, emotional intelligence, visualising greatness, aware of status and skills were identified as attributes of Lean leaders. Successful Lean leaders are open to developing their own skills and competencies.



Source(s): Authors' own work; adapted from Liker and Convis, (2012)

Figure 1. Diamond model of lean leadership development



Source(s): Authors' own work; adapted from Dombrowski and Mielke, (2014)

Figure 2. Fundamental principles of lean leadership and rules for sustainable implementation

- *Qualification* – Empowerment, trust, communication, clarify, governance and consistency, and fit for purpose were identified as attributes of Lean leaders. This enables leaders to support employees' development, both individually and collectively.
- *Gemba* – Care, recognition, engagement, leader-employee relationship, communication and fairness were identified as attributes of Lean leaders. The leader considers the Gemba as the place of learning and action and performs regular Gemba walks publicly with these attributes.
- *Hoshin Kanri* – Define and provide value, demonstrate Lean principles, communication and role adaption were identified as attributes of Lean leaders. These attributes help the leader to focus on continuous improvement processes and strategic alignment of activities, processes and goals, maintain a customer focus and act within the hierarchical structure of the organisation.

Currently, there are several studies within the Lean leadership research sphere; Table 1 captures a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of some of the frameworks.

Table 1. Review of lean frameworks

Framework	Strengths	Weaknesses
Lean leadership by Dombrowski and Mielke (2014)	It provides a system for the sustainable implementation and continuous improvement of lean organisations	There is a lack of detailed implementation steps
Lean leadership attributes by Aij et al. (2015b)	It demonstrates that successful implementations need systemic change and invested leadership	Health-care-specific framework
Lean leadership practices by Ashtiani et al. (2017)	It presents a lean transformational leadership organisational conceptual model, combining lean leadership and transformational leadership	Lack of a of practical steps in the leadership model
Music as a framework for Lean leadership by Emiliani and Emiliani (2013)	It uses music as a system to compare and understand lean leadership	Strong focus on flow, lack of practical steps
Demystifying Lean leadership by Netland et al. (2020)	This study covers specific lean leadership practices for top-managers, middle managers and front-line managers	It is a discussion study and does not explore the practical steps
Lean leadership competencies for Industry 4.0 by Bianco et al. (2021)	The study identified 18 Lean leadership competencies and six Leadership 4.0 competencies	Industry 4.0 focus
The Toyota way leadership development model by Liker and Convis (2012)	Makes use of PDCA cycles to develop self, develop others, support Kaizen and align with organisational vision	Used in established lean organisations
Lean “leadership people process outcome” (LPPO) implementation model by K. Dibia et al. (2014)	It is system-based, people-driven and customer-centred	Used for lean implementations
Lean Developmental leadership by Ljungblom (2012)	It discusses lean behaviours	Study was conducted in Swedish context

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Overall, the most prevalent theme of Lean leadership research is the need for co-operation and engagement between workers and leaders in Lean organisations. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Lean should be seen as a cultural transformation that requires buy-in on every level of the organisation.

2.2 Ubuntu leadership

Ubuntu is the ancient indigenous African concept of “Humanness” or what it means to be human (Broodryk, 2007; Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee, 2022; Karsten and Illa, 2005; Bolden, 2014; Kelly, 2018; Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013; Mbigi, 1997; Msila, 2015; Van Heerden, 1998; Mangena, 2016; Muxe Nkondo, 2007). It is imperative to note that the philosophy was only recently documented in literature in the 1990s. Prior to this, Ubuntu was passed down from generation to generation verbally as the foundation of hope and leadership (Broodryk, 2006a).

While Ubuntu is apparent throughout Africa, it is important to understand that each country has its own undertaking of philosophy, wherein the philosophy slightly differs from country to country (Mangena, 2016; Muxe Nkondo, 2007). In modern day, the Ubuntu philosophy can be found in several African countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Ghana, Angola and the democratic Republic of Congo (Mangena, 2016).

Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee (2022) explain that: “With South Africa being a melting pot of rich diversity and cultural wealth, it is composed of several cultures and subcultures. In South Africa, the Ubuntu philosophy often governs the way a great deal of the population live their lives. Moreover, some South African cultures may unconsciously exercise Ubuntu principles, even without referring to it by name”.

The crux of the Ubuntu philosophy is summarised in the isiZulu aphorism “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which translates to “I am a person through other people” (Broodryk, 2006b). Furthermore, Ubuntu encompasses eight basic values, namely, Broodryk (2006b):

- (1) *Caring* – sympathy, appreciation and empathy;
- (2) *Compassion* – humanness, human rights, humanity, spontaneity, friendliness and helpfulness;
- (3) *Forgiveness* – understanding and consideration;
- (4) *Honesty* – good versus bad, norms and openhandedness;
- (5) *Love* – kindness, charity, tolerance and peace;
- (6) *Perseverance* – strength, commitment and cohesion;
- (7) *Responsibility* – respect, obedience, giving unconditionally and sharing; and
- (8) *Self-control* – order, dignity, informality, redistribution and spirituality.

The aforementioned core values of Ubuntu transcend into the leadership sphere (Ncube, 2010). Studies explored the values of Ubuntu as a leadership philosophy, placing special emphasis on collectivism and relationships over material things (Ncube, 2010). While there are various definitions of Ubuntu leadership, a fulsome definition is provided in the following quote from Burgess (2017):

An inclusive leader, her approach prizes community and equity, and it is infused with compassion, dignity, humility, and respect - an approach that is often referred to as Ubuntu leadership

In literature, different authors may differ in the principles of Ubuntu leadership; therefore, it is worth analysing the existing body of research on Ubuntu leadership to analyse and synthesise the principles.

3. Research methodology

To explore the existing body of literature on Ubuntu leadership, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted. This SLR took the form of a scoping review, thus allowing for the scoping of various studies to analyse and collate the principles of Ubuntu leadership. Due to the limited literature on Ubuntu leadership, an SLR was the best way to ensure that all the existing literature was reviewed, thereby not missing a relevant study with a traditional literature review. The SLR methodology suggested by [Albliwi et al. \(2014\)](#) was used and is detailed as follows:

- *Step 1:* Develop a research purpose and/or objective – clearly state the goal of the SLR.
- *Step 2:* Develop research protocol – create a research protocol that includes the purpose, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, databases, keywords and quality assessment criteria.
- *Step 3:* Establish relevance criteria – state the reasoning for if a resource is relevant to this study.
- *Step 4:* Search and retrieve the literature – conduct searches on applicable scientific databases to find literature.
- *Step 5:* Selection of studies – use the inclusion and exclusion criteria to select studies.
- *Step 6:* Quality assessment for relevant studies – assess the quality of each paper.
- *Step 7:* Data extraction – extract relevant information from the papers.
- *Step 8:* Analysis and synthesis of findings – analyse and synthesise the data from the papers to find themes and patterns.
- *Step 9:* Report – report the review in detailed results.
- *Step 10:* Dissemination – publish the SLR.

The outcomes of Steps 1 to 6 are captured in sub-section 3.1–3.6, while Steps 7 to 8 are in Section 4.1 and 4.2, respectively (as they are the findings of the study). Steps 9 and 10 are addressed by documenting and publishing this study.

3.1 *Step 1: Develop a research purpose and/or objective*

The purpose of this research is to investigate the available literature on Ubuntu leadership, to extract and collate the principles of Ubuntu leadership.

3.2 *Step 2: Develop a research protocol*

[Table 2](#) depicts the research protocol, which includes the purpose of the study, along with the inclusion and exclusion criteria to mitigate researcher bias. The table also encapsulates the databases searched, along with the keywords and quality assessment criteria. It is important to note that the search was not time bound and included studies up till February 2024 when the search was conducted. Additionally, to find Lean studies with a focus on leadership, business and engineering, the databases in [Table 2](#) were selected.

Table 2. Research review protocol

Protocol area	Discussion
Purpose of the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To investigate the available literature on Ubuntu leadership, to extract and collate the principles of Ubuntu leadership
Inclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature that discusses the principles of Ubuntu leadership
Exclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-English studies Duplicates Religious takes on Ubuntu Ubuntu software studies
Search databases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Science Direct Scopus IEEE Explore Web of Science EBSCOhost Emerald Insight Journals
Keywords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Ubuntu leadership”
Quality assessment criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recovered literature will be checked for relevance Check for lack of supporting resources Checked for unclear scope and context Check for lack of credibility, reliability and validity

Source(s): Authors’ own work; structure adapted from [Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee \(2022\)](#)

3.3 Step 3: Establish relevance criteria

To leave room for as many studies to be included as possible, it is important to have very specific relevance criteria ([Albliwi et al., 2014](#)). Thus, to keep the search as wide as possible and due to the limited pool of literature, the only inclusion criteria was that studies should discuss the principles.

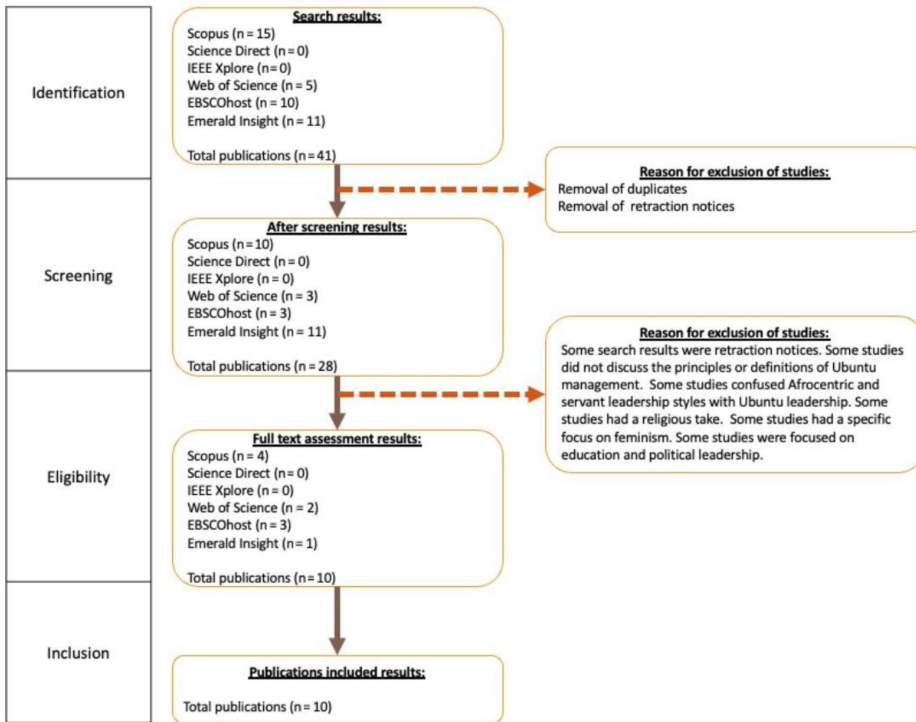
3.4 Step 4: Search and retrieve the literature

The search and retrieval process is documented in the “identification” section of [Figure 3](#), which shows the relevant database search results for the keywords. In total, 41 studies were the result over the six databases.

3.5 Step 5: Selection of studies

After removing duplicates and non-publications (retraction notices), 28 studies remained for evaluation of their abstracts. [Figure 3](#)’s ‘screening’ and ‘Eligibility’ sections showcase the outcome of this step. Studies were excluded for the following reasons:

- Some studies did not discuss the principles or definitions of Ubuntu management.
- Some studies confused Afrocentric and servant leadership styles with Ubuntu leadership.
- Some studies had a religious take.
- Some studies had a specific focus on feminism.
- Some studies were focused on education and political leadership.



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 3. Selection process chart

3.6 Step 6: Quality assessment for relevant studies

The quality assessment was conducted on each of the publications by reading the full texts. Ergo, ten research publications were selected for inclusion in the SLR, as depicted in Figure 3's "Inclusion" section.

4. Findings

The findings of the study are from part of Steps 7 and 8. These two steps are discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, respectively.

4.1 Step 7: Data extraction

Once the list of publications was finalised and their full texts studied, a summary of the leadership principles mentioned was captured. Thereafter, themes started to emerge from the occurrence of Ubuntu leadership principles and were marked down with an X. The titles, author and year, Ubuntu leadership principles and the emerged themes are captured in Table 3.

4.2 Step 8: Analysis and synthesis of findings

From Table 2, the following subsection captures the analysis and synthesis of the findings.

Table 3. Data extracted from applicable literature

Title	Author and Year	Ubuntu Principles	Ubuntu leadership principles (Occurrence)														
			Believe in collective responsibility	Exercise collective decision making	Serve the community	Drive change	Exercise compassion and respect	Practice shared development	Value people	Display loyalty	Demonstrate reconciliation for conflict management	Be transparent and opened	Support interconnectiveness	Encourage employee development	Elevate employee performance	Demonstrate enthusiasm or optimism	
Leadership in Southern Africa: A Regional Afrocentric Hierarchical Taxonomy	Grobler and Singh (2018)	1. Have strong participatory and communalistic element 2. Be seen as facilitators and servant to the community 3. Emphasise participative decision-making 4. Envisage change (Learning/task related activity) 5. Have enthusiasm and optimism 6. Continuous representing and networking 7. Ensure consensus via democracy and people mobilisation, sharing in meaningful collective expressions	X	X	X	X							X				X
Spirituality and leadership in a South African context	Makka (2019)	1. Exhibit care, respect, tolerance, compassion, communality, protecting others, living selflessly 2. Serve the community 3. Emphasises a collectivist rather than an individualist approach 4. Sharing and collective ownership of opportunities 5. Responsibilities and challenging team members 6. Showcasing importance of people and relationships over things 7. Participatory leadership 8. Demonstrate decision-making, loyalty and reconciliation as a goal of conflict management	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X	X		
Unpacking inclusivity: Lessons from Ubuntu leadership	Burgess (2017)	1. Values – Undergrid and shape everything they do 2. Collective – Ubuntu leaders begin with and elevate the collective 3. Compassion – Lead with compassion 4. Passion – Lead with passion and conviction 5. Character – lead with understanding that your character shapes who you are 6. Legacy consciousness – Continuously shape the future by how the lead here and now 7. Voice and touch – Conned their voice and touch	X	X	X		X			X	X		X		X	X	X
Homo Ubuntu leadership for the twenty-first century	Ubajiro and Lee (2022)	1. Reciprocity, inclusivity and shared destiny through collective responsibility 2. Importance of people and relationships over things 3. Participatory leadership and decision making 4. Loyalty and openness to change for the greater good, grounded in trust and fairness 5. Reconciliation as goal of conflict management	X	X	X					X	X	X	X				
Ubuntu Leadership: An African Panacea for Improving School Performance	Selthodi (2019)	1. Leaders need compassion 2. Leaders must be collaborative 3. Leaders must be inclusive 4. Leaders must uphold moral and social values 5. Leaders must support interconnectivity 6. Leaders must focus on collective shared values 7. Leaders must have solidarity	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	
Leadership for high performance in local councils in Cameroon and Nigeria. Examining deviant and concordant practices to the philosophy of Ubuntu	Eyong (2019)	1. Interdependence 2. Close affinity 3. People-orientation 4. Humanity 5. Vision and purpose 6. Performance 7. Ethical practice	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Africanising the curriculum: indigenous perspectives and theories	Maiba and Gumbo (2016)	1. Listening 2. Empathy 3. Solving problems together 4. Self-awareness 5. Persuasion (collective decision making) 6. Vision (challenge everyone) 7. Foresight 8. Win the trust of employees (people centeredness) 9. Commitment to growing the people 10. Build a strong community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Ancient Wisdom for Ethical Leadership: Ubuntu and the Ethic of Ecosophy.	Elkington (2020)	1. Seek the good of the community 2. Seek to realize my full potential as a human being by developing my character and empowering those around me 3. Ensure that all people are heard or considered before I make a decision 4. Process of gentle caring influence expressed through consensus building 5. Must have the view " leadership is not something I decide to do; it is something I earn based on the sanction and unity of one's people" 6. Must understand that their freedom and the freedom of my community are inextricably bound together in Ubuntu	X		X					X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Perceptions regarding the impact of ubuntu and servant leadership on employee engagement in the workplace	Muller et al. (2019)	1. Survival 2. Spirit of solidarity 3. Compassion 4. Dignity and respect		X	X		X						X	X	X	X	X
Leadership lessons from the African tree	Van der Coll (2003)	1. Communal enterprise 2. Leadership legitimacy 3. Value sharing • Respect and dignity • Interconnectedness • Continuous integrated development • Collectivism and solidarity	X		X		X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X

Source(s): Authors' own work

4.2.1 Valuable insights about Ubuntu leadership. The majority of the publications found mention Nelson Mandela as the paragon of an Ubuntu leader, as he had demonstrated the values of Ubuntu through his recognition of the value of all people. All the studies agree that Ubuntu leadership is about communality, interconnectedness and serving the community at large. [Ubalijoro and Lee \(2022\)](#) state that leaders should let go of blame and ego to be open to interdependence, shared responsibility and interconnection. [Setlhodi \(2019\)](#) explained that an Ubuntu leader needs to be ready to cultivate African solutions that people can relate to solve their problems. Furthermore, the study found that the responsibility of Ubuntu leadership and shared values denote the genealogy of African practices ([Setlhodi, 2019](#)).

Additionally, [Muller et al. \(2019\)](#) found that Ubuntu leadership is posited to positively influence organisational performance by increasing employee engagement. Cultural and racial transformation of organisations is a key concern in South African organisations; [Van der Colff \(2003\)](#) explains that Ubuntu leadership could be integrated into an organisation to enable the leadership to dismantle the past organisational culture, thereby promoting the development of a new inclusive culture. To move South Africa forward in the technological era, it is suggested that Ubuntu leadership might manifest well within the 21st century's Industry 4.0 context, as Ubuntu leaders are to be change drivers ([Elkington, 2020](#)). [Ubalijoro and Lee \(2022\)](#) agree, stating that by using Moore's Law, technologies are reaching the remotest parts of Africa, thereby harnessing Africa's capacity for technological leap-frogging.

4.2.2 Collated Ubuntu leadership principles. From the 10 publications examined in the SLR, the common Ubuntu leadership principles were identified from the themes and patterns of converging data. Furthermore, many authors cautioned readers to be aware of servant leadership and Afrocentric leadership, which are similar to Ubuntu leadership but not the same.

The common Ubuntu leadership principles found are:

- *Believe in collective responsibility* – Leaders must believe in and practice the responsibility of the collective (the community, organisation and so forth). It is important that leaders exhibit care, tolerance, compassion and selflessness when doing this.
- *Exercise collective decision-making* – Leaders must consult team members before making decisions, especially if it affects them. It is important that leaders modify plans to include team members' suggestions and address their concerns. It is essential for leaders to delegate responsibility and authority to team members for important tasks and decisions. Thus, trusting members to make decisions.
- *Serve the community* – Leaders must remember to serve the community at large (be it the organisation or team). Leaders must think of the greater good and encourage team member to do the same.
- *Drive change* – Leaders must have a strong personality to drive needed changes while getting buy-in from other team members. It is essential for an organisation and team members to grow, develop and improve continuously.
- *Exercise compassion and respect* – Leaders need to remember the saying that underpins the Ubuntu philosophy: "I am a person through other people", which implies that we are all interconnected. Ergo, leaders must approach team members with compassion and understanding about their situations while showing them mutual respect at all times.
- *Practice shared development* – Leaders must ensure that their skills are developing constantly. And, just as they have been uplifted and developed, they too must uplift and develop the team members. Leaders must understand that if everyone has an opportunity to improve, the whole community will improve in turn.

- *Value people* – Leaders must see the value in each and every one of their team members. Leaders must view the purpose of a business as the promotion of harmonious relationships with stakeholders, especially with employees, and not solely profit maximisation.
- *Display loyalty* – Leaders must be faithful to and trusting of their team members and the organisation. They must exercise and live the organisational values and the core values of Ubuntu.
- *Demonstrate reconciliation for conflict management* – Leaders must try to keep the team harmonious at all times. Within the Ubuntu philosophy, this implies that leaders must encourage team members to discuss their challenges and disagreements with each other to find common ground.
- *Be transparent and opened* – Leaders must exercise transparency, honesty and curiosity to encourage ideas and initiatives more than criticism towards team members.
- *Support interconnectedness* – Leaders must understand that their community is inextricably bound together in Ubuntu. Implying that their actions and decisions will affect the organisation and team.
- *Encourage employee development* – Leaders must encourage team members to develop their skills and uplift them, for if the whole team improves, the whole organisation (community) can benefit from it.
- *Elevate employee performance* – Leaders must be given the opportunity to evaluate team member performance, to identify their skills and possible opportunities for development.
- *Demonstrate enthusiasm or optimism* – Leaders must create a positive and encouraging workspace for team members; this can be achieved by demonstrating enthusiasm and optimism.

5. Discussion

Lean leadership principles and Ubuntu leadership principles have similar ideas, such as the importance of people (team members), improvement, development and decision-making. From the data extracted during the SLR, Ubuntu leadership principles (Section 4.2.2) were compared to Lean leadership principles (Section 2.1); this is captured in [Table 3](#). While there were several correlations between the principles, it was also noted that they were variations, as each leadership style has teachings that are uniquely theirs. These variations are present in [Table 4](#), such as a few Ubuntu principles that did not have corresponding Lean principles, this is presented in the last row of the table. Moreover, it was noted that some Lean principles did not have enough detail covered when matched with a corresponding Ubuntu principle. More specifically, for improvement culture, Lean teaches that failure should be viewed as a possibility to improve; Ubuntu does not cover this sufficiently. Additionally, for Hoshin Kanri, Lean emphasises demonstrating Lean philosophy principles, communicating well and practicing role adaptation; Ubuntu principles do not cover this sufficiently.

Given the correlations and variations between Lean leadership principles and Ubuntu leadership principles ([Table 4](#)), the following set of Lean–Ubuntu leadership principles were established to combine the principles of both leadership styles:

- *Humanness* – Leaders must always remember to support interconnectedness and serve the community.

Table 4. Comparison of lean leadership and ubuntu leadership

Lean leadership principles	Lean leadership attributes	Ubuntu leadership principles
<i>Improvement culture</i> – Striving for perfection and failure is a possibility to improve	Task identity, feedback, autonomy, belief in improvement and honesty were identified as attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe in collective responsibility • Drives change • Be transparent and opened
<i>Self-development</i> – Lean leaders are role models and new leadership skills are necessary	Show interest, facilitate resources, emotional intelligence, visualising greatness, aware of status and skills were identified as attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drives change • Practice shared development • Demonstrate enthusiasm or optimism
<i>Qualification</i> – Long-term development of employees and continuous learning	Empowerment, trust, communication, clarify, governance and consistency, and fit for purpose were identified as attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice shared development • Encourage employee development • Elevate employee performance
<i>Gemba</i> – Shop floor management and decision based on firsthand knowledge	Care, recognition, engagement, leader-employee relationship, communication and fairness were identified as attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise collective decision-making • Exercise respect and compassion • Value people • Display loyalty
<i>Hoshin Kanri</i> – Customer focus and aligned goals on all levels	Define and provide value, demonstrate Lean principles, communication and role adaption were identified as attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drives change
<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve the community • Demonstrate reconciliation for conflict management • Support interconnectedness

Source(s): Authors' own work

- *Improvement culture* – Leaders must continuously strive for perfection in the workplace. This is enhanced by driving change, believing in collective responsibility and being transparent and opened with the team. Additionally, leaders must remind team members that failure is a possibility to improve.
- *Self-development* – Leaders must ensure that they are role models for the organisation. This is enhanced by driving change, being enthusiastic and optimistic, as well as practising shared development to upskill themselves and the team.
- *Qualification* – Leaders must focus on the long-term development of employees and ensure continuous learning takes place. This is enhanced by practising shared development, encouraging employee development and evaluating employee performance to identify opportunities for learning.
- *Gemba* – Leaders must view the Gemba as a place for learning from their team. Leaders must allow the team to collectively make decisions based on their first-hand experience and knowledge. This is enhanced by exercising respect and compassion by truly valuing team members and displaying loyalty to their team.

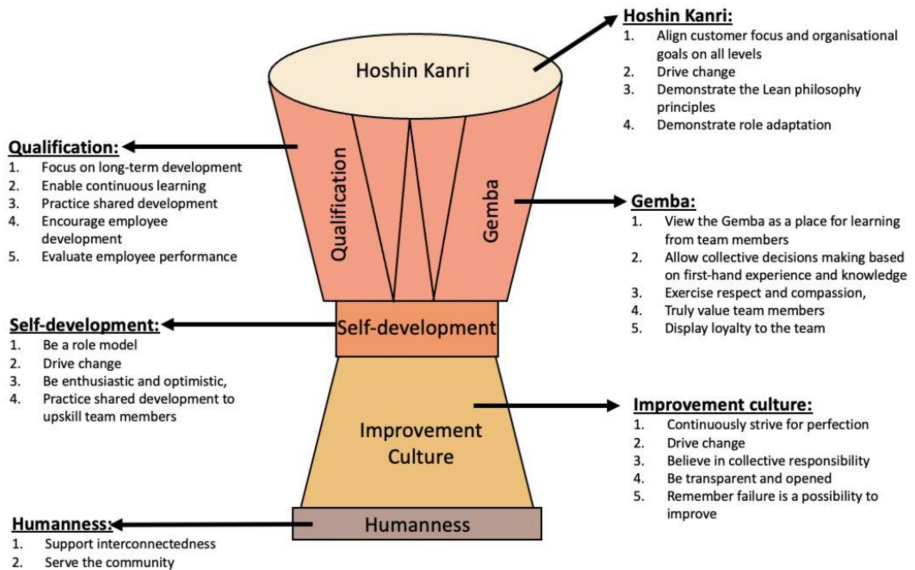
- *Hoshin Kanri* – Leaders must align customer focus and organisational goals on all levels. Leaders must demonstrate the Lean philosophy principles and demonstrate role adaptation. This is enhanced by driving change in alignment with the goals of the team.

5.1 *Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework development*

As discussed in the introduction (Section 1), several authors have found that misunderstanding Lean is one of the main contributors to the low success rate (Nordin *et al.*, 2012; Bamber and Dale, 2000; Bhasin, 2011; Bonavia and Marin, 2006; Crute *et al.*, 2003; Lee-Mortimer, 2008; Wong *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, some researchers suggest that cultural differences also contribute to low success rates due to Lean originating and being deeply rooted in Japanese culture (Melton, 2005; Worley and Doolen, 2006; Danese *et al.*, 2018; Hoogvelt and Yuasa, 1994). To execute future research around this, Ahmad (2013) put forward a framework that illustrates the need for cultural adaptations of Lean implementation plans.

To address this problem of low Lean success rates and the need for cultural adaptations of Lean implementation strategies, the Lean–Ubuntu leadership principles were used to develop the Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework (Figure 4). This framework is a literature-based framework that provides guidance to organisations wanting to implement Lean leadership in the South African context, by using Ubuntu as a bridge in understanding the cultural differences in leadership styles from the East (Japan).

Guidance in framework design from Aalbregtse *et al.* (1991) and Anand and Kodali (2009) was used to design the Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework, specifically that a framework must:



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 4. Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework (African Drum model)

- depict an outline of a philosophy;
- communicate a change process that should be adopted to achieve a new vision; and
- compel different parties within an organisation to address a substantial list of key issues.

The Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework was engineering in the form of an African drum, with the Lean–Ubuntu leader being the drumbeat of the organisation culture. In a similar vein to the Lean leadership house framework (Figure 2) and to stay true to the Lean philosophy, the new framework uses a similar structure. The foundation of the Lean–Ubuntu framework is humanness, a teaching that underpins the Ubuntu philosophy and the South African Culture. The base of the drum is improvement culture, strongly rooted at the base of this framework and in the foundation of the Lean framework (Figure 2).

The neck of the drum is self-development to symbolise how leaders cannot hold up the team without developing themselves first. The top hull of the drum is made up of qualification and Gemba, as they are seen as equal pillars in the Lean leadership model. And finally, the very top of the drum is Hoshin Kanri, as it is always part of the final steps in the Lean philosophy. Furthermore, the Lean–Ubuntu leadership model incorporates both the correlations and variations in the leadership styles, as discussed in Table 4.

The framework in Figure 4 can be used to guide South African leaders in Lean organisation to understand how to fit the Lean philosophy within the local context. The framework takes into consideration that the foundation of successful relationships (leadership) is humanness. Lean leaders will be able to harness the power of Ubuntu (a common ground for South Africans) to embody leadership qualities that encompass both Lean and Ubuntu. This will make Lean leaders more appealing to employees, which means they are more likely to listen to what the Lean leaders have to say. This acts as a bridge for the gaps in misunderstandings of Lean leadership principles and increases the chance of buy-in from employees during Lean implementation projects.

6. Conclusions

Lean implementation projects have a low success rate due to various reasons like misunderstanding Lean and cultural difference in implementing Lean outside of Japan. Researchers suggested creating a cultural adaptation of Lean for an improved buy-in of employees and high success rates during Lean implementations.

Taking inspiration from the work of Mangaroo-Pillay and Coetzee (2022) on the comparison between the management styles of Lean and Ubuntu, this study aimed to delve into the similarities between Lean leadership and Ubuntu leadership to propose a South African Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework. This led to the development of the framework presented in Figure 4, using a SLR to collect data. The connections between these management styles are evident from their similar ideas of the importance of people (team members), improvement, development and decision-making. However, several variations between the two styles were noted. As to not dilute either of their teaching, the designed framework was an amalgamation of the principles of both styles.

By using this leadership framework, South African organisations will be able to bridge the gaps in misunderstandings of Lean leadership principles and have a better chance of buy-in from employees during Lean implementation.

This study focused on the development of a literature-based framework; however, it is recommended that future studies validate the model by practical implementation in South African organisations. Additionally, this framework is limited to a South African cultural

adaptation of Lean leadership; it is suggested that future studies explore other cultural adaptations in other countries.

7. Implications of this study

This study focused on the conceptualisation and design of the Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework. The theoretical implications of the framework include improved Lean implementation success rates in South Africa, as it provides a customised approach to Lean leadership in the local context. It also introduces a new leadership style by combining elements of Ubuntu leadership and Lean leadership.

Due to the theoretical nature of this study, it is not known what the practical implementation of this framework does to the organisational culture. However, it creates the opportunity for leadership that is more inclusive of diverse cultures in the South African environment. It also fosters the climate for enhancing employee buy-in during implementations.

Both Ubuntu and Lean philosophies teach the importance of people and team members; by using this framework, organisations have a better opportunity to engage with employees and help them better understand Lean during the implementation stages and bridging the gap to a brighter South Africa.

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