

A TEACH-IN ON LEADERSHIP

At the Intersection Where Worlds Collide

On April 17, 2007, I led the “teach-in” on leadership for APARC. The emerging leaders from colleges and universities in Africa and the United States provided a wonderful occasion for a discussion entitled, “At the Intersection Where Worlds Collide.” This theme addresses the issues and challenges of emerging global leaders who must “stay awake” at the intersection of powerful systemworlds (politics, economics, science, business, communications, and technology) and lifeworlds (mediating institutions that engender and sustain values and horizons of meaning) — and negotiate the traffic.

While it is true that some of our fundamental assumptions about leadership and values are being challenged, the greatest challenge for emerging global leaders is to “stay awake!” “Staying awake” at the intersection where worlds collide is an appropriate metaphor for the crisis that confronts leaders today and which plagues our world and impacts our personal and public lives. It seems that everywhere we look, we see polarization and collision — whether in discussions about globalization, national security, or cultural values. How leaders choose to act where these worlds collide will determine the direction of our businesses, our nations, and the world. This metaphor of a noisy and dangerous intersection places emerging leaders squarely at the heart of the traffic. It also provides a platform for a larger discussion about leadership which weds an enlightened sense of values and moral imagination with creative and bold public action. For African and African-American leaders, these questions are paramount:

- What does it mean to lead? What are the values that are at the heart of our leadership?
- How do we find the courage to take our stand at the intersection?
- Who and what can we draw on to help us lead? What are the critical skills and competencies that we need to lead?

These are some of the central questions that we asked emerging leaders to answer at the intersection. Yet, answers based on critical analysis, factual presentations, and statistical data alone will not suffice. As leaders, we said, new leaders must find a way to remember what values called them to lead, to re-envision the world that those values can create, and to courageously confront the challenges of standing at this intersection.



Dr. Walter E. Fluker, Executive Director of the Leadership Center at Morehouse College leads the “Teach-in on Leadership” at the African Presidential Roundtable 2007 on April 17 at Boston University.

Recent literature on African leadership was presented regarding basic assumptions about the distinctive contributions and challenges that attend the real work of leaders. Theoretical perspectives of convergence, divergence, and crossvergence were discussed. The convergence thesis maintains that economic ideology drives cultural values, such that exposure to Western ways of engaging in leadership will result in the adoption of Western values (Ralston et al., 1993). The divergence perspective, on the other hand, recognizes national and cultural differences. Its proponents maintain that culture is deeply rooted and drives the values of any society beyond economic ideology. The divergence perspective is consistent with the dominant view of some cross-cultural theorists who emphasize that all leadership practices are in large part culturally determined, although there is little consensus on the significance of particular cultural variables (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Adler, 2002). A third perspective has developed: crossvergence, based on acculturation theory within the field of anthropology, proposed that when two cultures meet, a blending of values may result. The crossvergence perspective therefore recognizes the importance of economic ideology and national culture, as well as the importance of the synergetic interaction between the two (Ward et al. 1999 and Ralston et al. 1993).

Our presentation strongly reflected the crossvergence perspective which is wedded to African humanism as a point of departure for the education and training of future leaders throughout the Diaspora. This perspective in no ways ignores the particularity of cultural narratives that shape character and provide foundational values for emerging leaders, rather the syncretistic blend of the two ideas pro-

THE AFRICAN PRESIDENTIAL ROUNDTABLE 2007 American-African Universities Collaborative



Morehouse College Professor Melvinia King interacts with students at the “Teach-in on Leadership” at the African Presidential Roundtable 2007 on April 17 at Boston University.

vide a powerful platform for ethical leadership. African leadership scholars, Nadine Mendelek Theimann and Kurt April, suggest:

“African humanism requires interconnected individuals to contribute to the welfare of the society in which they reside. This is Africa’s gift to the world: social leadership within a context of hu-

manistic citizenship. This approach may not be the most expedient or efficient, but it promises a more sustainable society.” (2007)

We also indicated that key values of this merger of African and African-American leadership are:

- Respect for the dignity of others;
- Group solidarity: an injury to one is an injury to all;
- Teamwork: none of us is greater than all of us;
- Service to others in the spirit of harmony; and
- Interdependence: each one of us needs all of us.

(Lovemore Mbigi, “Spirit of African Leadership: A Comparative African Perspective”)

In summary, we said that at this intersection, where leaders face continual change, real threats, and increasing globalization, complexity has become the norm. Among the many challenges that emerging African and African-American leaders will face in the 21st Century, the greatest of all may be the challenge to “stay awake.” The basic argument underlying our interventive strategy is that leadership at this intersection requires an ethical anchor, a values-based structure in which leaders themselves must be central participants.

Walter Earl Fluker, Ph.D.

American-African Universities Collaborative: Johannesburg

Twenty-seven AAU Collaborative students and faculty from the University of Ghana-Legon, the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg participated in the Roundtable 2007 in Johannesburg from April 16 – 18.

The AAU Collaborative activities began with a tour of Soweto, home of South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement, and the present-day most populous and influential black urban residential area in all of South Africa. Day two, the Steve Biko Foundation led a half-day seminar on Black Consciousness. The Foundation, based on the legacy of Bantu Steve Biko, emphasizes the importance of the connection between identity, agency, and change; and the link between the individual and society, between history and biography.

The seminar had two foci: (i) to create dialogue about government policy, popular culture, and race relations; and (ii) to discuss the importance of youth involvement in community-based leadership as an avenue for the civic participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of African societies. It emphasized that in using history and heritage, young leaders can strengthen democracy by promoting a culture in which Africans become the architects of change on the continent. Students were inspired to take a new approach to



leadership and think more strategically about how to engage themselves as leaders in their communities.

The AAU Collaborative participants spent the afternoon at the Apartheid Museum where they experienced a vivid showcase of the Apartheid struggle in South Africa.

The final day, the five former African heads of state convened a breakfast for the AAU Collaborative students in which the former African statesmen engaged the students in open dialogue about leadership in Africa. The invigorating question and answer dialogue explored matters relative to leadership on the continent, and the way forward for the next-generation leaders.