Innovation Series 4: Donald Trump

Details
Written by Prof. Scott Bellows

Onyango always dreamed of becoming a great business leader. From his educational pursuits at the University of Nairobi, he understood that prolific leaders learn managerial skills and do not inherently just know the right actions from birth. But throughout his professional life, Onyango felt like he saw most effective managers appearing more on television than he ever encountered in real life.

Eventually, Onyango landed a coveted sales executive role with a multinational technology firm with regional offices in Nairobi. He saw an opportunity to revolutionize the firm’s marketing process and motivate the team around an already solid product line. Inasmuch, he looked for role models so as to mimic their actions. He pondered the convertibility of success from prominent business leaders who also transition into politics like President Uhuru Kenyatta, Governor Evans Kidero, and Senator Gideon Moi. What traits and qualities made successful business tycoons and political figures?

A friend told Onyango that he should look at Donald Trump. In fact, barely a few hours can pass without international news outlets mentioning something controversial about billionaire mogul Donald Trump. Further, Americans living in Kenya receive questions each day from Kenyan colleagues about their opinions on Donald Trump’s chances of success in the presidential elections next year in the United States.

Onyango wondered whether apparent abrasive controversial leadership actually works in business like the way Donald Trump seems to utilize the techniques in his political campaign. John desired innovative and creative solutions to emanate from his colleagues.

In order to delve into Onyango’s leadership questions about Mr. Trump, let us look at the well-researched leadership framework as delineated by researchers Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. Leaders must work to enhance the perceptions that followers hold of them. In leadership, unfortunately perceptions matter more than reality. First, an impactful leader must inspire his or her followers. Supporters must perceive high levels of inspiration stemming from the leader. Donald Trump clearly captures the imagination of his fans and inspires them. He utilizes his body language, tone of voice, and sharp rhetoric.

While millions of his opponents also tune into party debates in record numbers, those disinclined towards his political views find his style, speech, and goals as coercive. Research shows that
perceptions of coercion by a leader causes resistance and increases his or her ‘unfavorability’ rating. So while most leaders hold supporters and detractors, Secretary Hillary Clinton uniformly receives lackluster reviews on her ability to inspire voters. Leaked documents over the summer even showed a strategy by her team to appear more at ease and inspiring.

How one inspires followers differs from culture to culture. South Sudanese on average desire a strong stoic leader. Americans gain inspiration from articulate oratory, solid vocal tones, and a strong “presidential look” of seriousness. Kenyans, on the other hand, prefer leaders who can inspire through humor. Sweeping yet anecdotal research conducted in bilateral U.S. Government youth programs in Kenya showed that when ethnicity and money were removed from political maneuvering, the most humorous candidate won every opinion poll. So Onyango with his sales coworkers should inspire a shared vision of the future through humor and analogies.

Second, leaders must demonstrate honesty. While followers react harshly to perceived dishonest leaders, perceptions of honesty bolster one’s leadership credentials. So while Donald Trump’s supporters like his “straight talk”, his detractors express disdain at his shifting position on Syrian refugees that enhance their perceptions of his dishonesty. Since Mr. Trump speaks fearlessly with blunt force, some Americans perceive his techniques as containing honest statements. Secretary Clinton, on the other hand, holds low perceptions of honesty due to the current whirlwind about her use of personal emails for official work. In terms of Onyango, he must ensure not an ounce of perceived dishonesty creeps into his leadership style or he will lose all those in the office and his clients.

Third, followers’ perceptions of a leader’s forward looking vision stands as critical. If someone comes off as forward looking, then they possess a greater chance of amassing followers. In terms of forward looking, Donald Trump appears worse than his strengths in the first two traits. He lacks specificity and instead relies on attacks. A leader without specifics about the future does not retain his or her followers for long. Hillary Clinton poses greater forward looking ability. Onyango must excite his office with forward looking capacity.

Fourth and finally, a leader must demonstrate their competency. Typically a politician shows competency through success in prior public offices held. However, the Republican voters seem unimpressed with such views of competency in their current election cycle. Instead the Republican voters value business experience as a sign of competency. Donald Trump scores highly in his constituency’s mind even though he has never demonstrated competency in any elected office. While Hillary Clinton has held public office, the American voters seem less inclined to count it towards competency this time. Onyango as a younger sales executive must demonstrate his competency through overt direct ways since perceptions of youth in the workplace often biases against competency.

So while Donald Trump may captivate much of the world at present, Onyango should not imitate his
leadership style. Further, loud inspiring leaders often do not listen to their staff, but listening skills prove crucial in office settings. A leader who comes off as too dominant actually hinders innovation and creativity since his or her employees fear taking risks.

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Professor Scott serves as the Director of the New Economy Venture Accelerator (NEVA) at USIU-Africa’s Chandaria School of Business, www.ScottProfessor.com, and may be reached on: info@scottprofessor.com or followed on Twitter: @ScottProfessor.

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