

# Ubuntu!

## An Inspiring Story About an African Tradition of Teamwork and Collaboration by Stephen Lundin and Bob Nelson

- Steve Biko: In the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in the field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.
- No matter where we live, we all share similar basic values and desires: We cherish family, love our children, want to make the most out of our lives and make a difference in the world, seek a sense of security and enjoy our friendships. But the focus of our attention is often on our *differences*. Being human is such a big idea that differences seem small by comparison.
- Simply being human is reason enough to be treated with respect, compassion and dignity.
- Sharing a dream is not enough; action is required. Organizations loudly and proudly proclaim that “people are our most important asset,” but in reality, only a few organizations fully deliver on this promise.
- Ubuntu is the ancient African philosophy that draws on the fact that we are one human family.
- I have never met a human being who didn’t want to do a good job and feel proud about the team with whom he or she worked.
- *We tell ourselves stories to explain the events in our lives. Being connected to others provides a necessary opportunity to challenge stories that might be hurting our performance and inhibiting our growth.*
- *Ubuntu means we’re all in this together.*
- Simon lowered his head self-consciously. “What’s wrong?” “You said, thank you.’ I have not heard this before. It’s all right. I don’t mind. I know you’re busy.” “Being busy is no excuse – I don’t say thank you enough. I guess I haven’t been in the habit of thanking my staff for doing what they’re paid to do.”
- *Being busy is no excuse for avoiding the things that matter most.*
- “You said ‘we.’ Did you have partners?” “Yes – everyone who worked at the factory. In the U.S. a small business owner would say, ‘I’ to demonstrate ownership. In my tradition we use the word ‘we,’ because at work we were a family, and as such, everyone was important.”
- *To engage another person in an authentic way releases the most powerful energy on the planet.*
- “When you ran your business, did you ever have some workers who weren’t motivated to work hard?” “Yes. That is a problem in Africa and everywhere. When apartheid ended and we received our freedom, many were not ready for the change. Work was associated with oppression. Many thought that having freedom meant they no longer had to work. They expected the government to take care of them. They just didn’t understand about economics and the responsibilities that come with freedom. Their feelings were understandable but a problem for me because I had a business to run.”
- Ubuntu is a part of me – it is a part of us all. It is about teamwork and brotherhood. It is finding that part of you that connects with other people and bringing it to life. If you have to do work on the weekend in order for our team to succeed, then I have work to do, too. When you struggle, the Ubuntu in me reaches out to give you a hand. At the deepest level we are all brothers and sisters. We are all a part of the human family. If one of us hurts, we all hurt.”
- *Ubuntu is a philosophy that considers the success of the group above that of the individual.*
- Ubuntu is like the air I breathe. I don’t have to think about it because it is always present. I would have trouble describing the air around me. But if the air was removed, I would notice it immediately.” “Don’t we all have to succeed first individually?” “Not necessarily. When the greed of a few individuals brought the financial systems of the world to its knees, did you support those people to do as they wished?” “No, I was angry and afraid. Had we balanced the well-being of the community with the rights and actions of the individuals, the financial community might have avoided the crisis.” “Ubuntu is a part of the fabric of Africa. It comes alive one individual at

- a time. It lives inside each of us who promotes the well-being of others and believes in the equality of all and our connection to the entire human race.”
- *The first step in bringing Ubuntu to life is discovering it in your own heart. Ubuntu comes from our natural energy within.*
  - Some teams are dominated by one or two talented players. But the teams that win championships usually have to find a way to get beyond their focus on a few individual stars and become a genuine team, working together. Some team members may have more talent and make bigger salaries, but on the court or field those differences take a backseat to the interests of the team. And that motivates all the members. They are all respected; they all have an important role to play in winning.
  - “When I ran my business, I recognized all who worked with me as equal fellow human beings and for that reason I gave them unconditional respect. I was no better than they; I was just the boss. This respect I had for those I worked with fostered trust. So when I asked for something to be done, the workers were willing to help because they trusted that I had their best interests at heart. In turn, they gave me the benefit of the doubt.
  - *With trust and respect, others will give you the benefit of the doubt. Without trust and respect, motivational techniques come across as manipulation.*
  - *Ubuntu starts with recognizing and embracing the humanity, the equality and the value of each person.*
  - “What if I don’t feel the respect for others you talk about? Do I fake it?” “There are those who advocate that route. I think this is bad advice. Faking doesn’t work; you cannot build trust with dishonesty. Each of us can detect a phony. You can’t just *do* Ubuntu. You must find a way to *be* Ubuntu. The first step is to get to know your employees as people and not just workers. That involves developing a sincere interest in each person. What is important to them? What are their interests? What are their goals?”
  - *Ubuntu does not mean respecting bad work; it does mean respecting the person who does the work.*
  - “We are not paying you to be the hardest worker. We pay you to be an effective manager and leader of a team. Something is wrong when you have to stay late and come in on weekends to meet your department’s obligations, doing or redoing your people’s work.” “I don’t like doing that, either, but I don’t know what else to do. I’m not getting the kind of high quality work from my staff that I need.” That’s the point. Being a manager is different from being an individual contributor.”
  - The fact that you’re being honest with yourself about your shortcomings is a good sign.
  - Be open to feedback from your employees.
  - *Ubuntu is a compassionate philosophy, but it is not soft. When the group is threatened by an individual’s behavior, that person must be challenged.*
  - You create a world that fits your beliefs. Many of the people who work under you might be giving you what you expect to get – to give them a chance to be on your side. All they know is that you are the boss and they must do as you say. Once you let differences define your relationship with them, instead of the things you have in common, it creates a situation of you against them. So you push against them and naturally they resist. You then have to rely on the authority of your position to get something done your way. At the core, you have formed no human connection, no reason for them to care.
  - *If you allow differences to define a relationship, you will always be at odds with others. Ubuntu asks: What do we have in common? How can we best work together?*
  - You work very hard. Perhaps much harder than you would have to work if you had a team working with you.
  - In a big company with a hierarchy, we can lose sight of our common bond.
  - Find a way to honor the human connection you have with others.
  - When you put people first, motivation and productivity and better customer service will follow.
  - “The thing that amazes me the most is how little gratitude people seem to feel for the abundance they have. Rather than be grateful for what they have, so many people focus on what they don’t have.” “It’s hard to feel happy in a world where all you see is what you lack.”

- Ubuntu is the African philosophy that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu credited when asked how the reconciliation between blacks and whites could occur with so little bloodshed and without retribution. It is simple, they would say. We are all members of the human family and we must work together to achieve a strong South Africa. Because we are all connected in our humanity, Ubuntu suggests that to harm another person would be to harm yourself. To seek revenge on mothers would be to hurt yourself. Ubuntu means unconditionally accepting the humanity of each human being.
- “What would it look like to embrace the concept of Ubuntu? What would it feel like?” “I’m not entirely sure but it seems as though we would better relate to each other as human beings rather than just as employees or managers.” “It would be like a family.” “Embracing a concept like Ubuntu would involve some risks but what is the alternative? Continuing to play corporate games, trying more half-hearted initiatives, politics and gossip, pitting one group against another. Indifference. We have good people. We need to affirm that goodness. Celebrate it.”
- “You have to be honest and direct with your employee, that is, be able to look him or her in the eye and tell the truth.” And the same would apply to employees. They must be true to themselves and honest and open with their managers.” “And that honesty does not have to be tactless or lack compassion.”
- Ubuntu can provoke all kinds of useful ideas and ways of cooperating that can be applied to the workplace.
- In Ubuntu, managers put ego and self aside. It’s about everyone who works here.
- Freedom and equality are highly valued in the United States politically but they are often not core values within U.S. corporations. In the workplace each person is respected as a person and that respect is not tied to performance. Compassion, honesty, lack of arrogance and self-importance, and a willingness to help others would all be signs of that. We are all connected; we are all equal. And we must help each other and work together as a team.
- *Two levels of recognition: The first is to value others simply for **who they are**. This is the heart of Ubuntu and it must always come first. The second is to value others for **what they achieve**. This kind of recognition is what drives most performance.*
- Hard work alone is not enough.
- A time of transition can be a time of great creativity.
- *When you leave what is comfortable and familiar in order to take on something new and exciting, it is natural to feel unsettled and even afraid. This is where the support and collaboration of colleagues is most important.*
- You know the old management expression – any change can be motivating for a while.
- **Guide to Team Development and Building a Community of Purpose**
  1. It starts with me. I must be more approachable, open, honest, transparent, supportive and compassionate. Check my ego at the door and act with humility and gratitude.
  2. Build trust by demonstrating respect for employees first and only second by focusing on what a person can do. At a basic human level we are all the same and we should treat each other as such. Follow through on commitments. Deeds must follow words.
  3. Develop a sense of common purpose in my group and explore ways we depend on one another and others depend on us.
  4. Start working on relationships.
  5. Lighten up and laugh at my own shortcomings and foibles.
  6. Find ways to help improve our quality of life at work.
- Be clear about the nature of the change and our strategy to achieve that change. What we are trying to bring about requires a personal commitment from everyone in the organization. People become resistant and detached from these top-down efforts. We want people to bring the Ubuntu philosophy into their lives. And that can never be legislated or mandated.
- *Before starting the workday I think about the things for which I am grateful. Doing this affects my attitude and I find myself more positive during the day.*
- *When someone is walking toward me I think about how I would want to be greeted and put on a smile as they approach.*
- *Keep my ego in check by keeping a log of times I was confident but wrong.*
- *Choose a team member and spend some private time talking about non-business things.*

- *Try to listen more and talk less.*
- *When conversing with someone I pay attention and put aside everything else. Be fully present.*
- *Be less quick to judge or evaluate motives. Look for positive intentions first.*
- *When I have a problem, move toward it rather than avoiding it or procrastinating.*
- *Be a person of my word. Do what I say I will do, when I say I'll do it.*
- *When someone is acting in a way that is inconsistent with our mission, find a way respectful way to call them on it for the good of the team.*
- Take advantages of opportunities to support team members, engage in conversation and develop a better understanding of their individual challenges.
- Educate and inspire. Make coming to work something to look forward to.
- Listen to my staff, try to understand their concerns and challenges from their point of view. Strive to keep every promise, every commitment I make. Show I can be trusted to do what I say I will do. Provide support and counsel but trust them to do the work.
- We spend the largest portion of our life at work. How can we improve the quality of that part of our life? Identify those things that contribute to a higher quality of life at work. Have some relaxed rules and allow for a little more self-expression. Spend more time getting to know people.
- Most vexing process glitches could be eliminated with better up front communication.
- Ubuntu contains the formula for human happiness. It's a philosophy of unity and purpose where our actions demonstrate a recognition and understanding that we are all connected. We choose to treat each other in an open, honest and respectful way while working to achieve our goals. We respect each person's humanity regardless of our differences. The values it is based on can influence our thoughts, behaviors and actions. It can break down barriers between people and foster the pursuit of common goals.
- Being "rewarded," "motivated" or "managed" by someone who has not connected with us at a human level often feels like manipulation. Ubuntu is about finding the common ground that connects one human to another. It is about accepting each human being as a unique and valuable member of the human community and respecting the humanity of each and every person we encounter. It fosters teamwork and cooperation and the contribution of every member of a team. *Ubuntu must start at a personal level.*
- Some may be paid more or less depending on the market value of skills and experiences, education or varying degrees of responsibility. But we all deserve the same level of respect from one another. There are no little people.
- *As long as there are employees who think of themselves as "little people," the work of Ubuntu is not finished.*
- The best way for someone to learn about the message and impact of Ubuntu is to experience it firsthand. Provide opportunities and encouragement for that to happen: set up opportunities to get to know one another, share information that is important to mutual success, ask for each employee's input and feedback.
- The best way to spread the message of Ubuntu is to create a nucleus of people who embrace Ubuntu in all aspects of their lives, starting at work. As the circle grows, so will Ubuntu's impact.
- Ubuntu cannot come across as just another management initiative, but as a philosophy, one with enormous potential to improve life.
- There needs to be an element of fun in what we do to energize others and help them bond.
- Model behaviors that reflect the spirit of recognition and cooperation and teamwork and equity.
- Never forget that this is an ongoing long-term effort, not one with a specific time frame. Build Ubuntu one conversation at a time.
- Ubuntu creates more energy. People are more alive. There is a sense of calm and cooperation and civility – of community. The atmosphere is more like that of a healthy family than a company. *The door to Ubuntu is called gratitude, and it is always open.*
- *The path to Ubuntu is marked by our humanity; we follow the path from person to person.*
- *The spirit of Ubuntu is found through community. It is created when you find unity of purpose with others.*
- *Embrace the humanity of all whom you encounter.*