



© Tomertu / AdobeStock

LIGHTS - Leadership

Inspiring differently to spark desire! Deep learning of responsible leadership through encounters with African transformational leaders

ESCP Impact Paper No.2026-10-ENG

Nathalie PRIME
ESCP Business School

Inspiring differently to spark desire! Deep learning of responsible leadership through encounters with African transformational leaders

Nathalie Prime*

ESCP Business School

Abstract

This article looks at how immersive encounters with transformational African leaders renew cognitive, emotional and behavioral learning among students studying responsible leadership. It is based on the thematic analysis of 16 individual self-reflecting notes written after a learning trip to Senegal. The results reveal a transformation process that took place across three dimensions – head, heart and hands – and is marked by the “unlearning” of dominant Western frameworks, strong emotional resonance, and professional ambition reshaped towards the desire to contribute collectively to the wider good. The study highlights the central role of the recipients' biographies and of the leaders' rooted authenticity in the process of transformative learning of responsible leadership. The results suggest that developing pedagogies for transition leadership that encourage better familiarity with the Global South are a way to inspire differently and ignite desire.

Keywords: Responsible leadership, deep, experiential and transformative learning, biographical positioning, grounded leadership, Africa

*Professor, ESCP Business School.

Inspiring differently to spark desire!

Deep learning of responsible leadership through encounters with African transformational leaders

Introduction

In a recent international study covering 44 countries, only 6% of the 23,482 respondents from the GenZ and Millennial generations said that their career goal was to occupy leadership positions (Deloitte, 2024). Yet meeting the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (a date approaching fast) supposes leaders are trained for the transition (van Noreen & Beehner, 2021); this is a central concern in responsible management education (RME), and business schools play a vital role in this respect (Russo *et al.*, 2023). But RME is almost an oxymoron (Dyllick, 2015) because it questions the capitalist paradigm of infinite production and consumption growth in a world constrained by planetary boundaries. Inevitably, this triggers questions about the relevance and applicability of RME to “real life.” Students notice that responsibility is a separate unit, and not a constitutive value of their training, whose hidden curriculum is not aligned with responsible management education (Hogdal *et al.*, 2021).

In this context, how can RME bring about the necessary deep learning for students to both transform on the inside (Prime, 2023) and transform the world? And how can this learning be credible in the sense that it opens students' minds not just to the need for responsible leadership (which is theoretically well understood), but also to its empirical reality? This article analyses how the situated and embodied encounters with transformational leaders in West Africa, in non-Western contexts (in Senegal to be precise) can simultaneously renew the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions of responsible leadership deep learning in a multicultural cohort of Master's in management students.

Theoretical settings

Transformative and experiential learning

As complements to traditional management pedagogical methods, experiential learning formats such as foreign travel have proven their transformative potential in self-training (Verzat & Prime, 2025). According to the theory of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), embodied immersion in a realistic and contextualized environment engages individuals physically, emotionally and cognitively; this is a necessary condition to launch the cycle of deep learning (concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, experimentation). The trip catalyzes deep learning when it exposes learners to “disorienting dilemmas” that combine skill learning (in this case, responsible leadership) and identity transformation (Mezirow, 2000), which lead them to question their references; this triggers not only cognitive changes, but also changes in the learners' very identity. Yet this transformation will not necessarily happen if the individuals are not guided in their reflection; they should be able to question their implicit hypotheses (where do my values come from, who validated them and who do they benefit?). What changes then is not just what learners know, but how they see themselves in the world.

Learning responsible leadership in the field through inspiration from actors rooted in their territories

Criticism has been leveled at these approaches of experiential and transformative learning for their mainly cognitive approach, and the fact that they neglect their emotional and embodied dimensions (Vince, 1998), which are not by-products of learning, but constitutive of it. Meeting transformational leaders during an immersive trip to Africa exposes participants to all of their dimensions, namely the “4 I's” that differentiate them from transactional leaders (Bass, 1999): idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders stimulate and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary results, while also developing their own leadership abilities. They help them grow in their mission by meeting their individual needs, making them more responsible, and by aligning the individual, the leader and the mission's goals.

However inspiration does not boil down to a motivation state that could be viewed as a dependent variable (the effect the leader has on followers) or as an aspect of leadership style. Recipients must be brought to understand the leader's effect produced on them in the context of their biographical position, i.e. the singular manner in which they fit the experience of this encounter into their own history, and how they respond to it (Alheit, 2022). Furthermore, these models were mainly developed in Western contexts (Liden & Antonakis, 2009), which limits their significance in other culturally situated environments, particularly in the Global South, and in the context of multicultural groups of learners, with each member contributing their own biographical position to the interpretation of the shared experience of these encounters.

Methodology

Study context

The learning trip to Senegal that is at the heart of the pedagogy in the specialization track Responsible Innovation in Africa represents a climactic learning experience (Verzat & Prime, 2024). It closes the on-site training period in Paris and ushers in the period of internship in Africa, as well as the end of the online training period. The learning trip was organized in partnership with a pioneer Senegalese management school, now a leader in West Africa. The sample was a group of 16 students of 13 different nationalities: 9 African nationals, 4 bi-national students from the diaspora, and 3 European nationals. From February 15 to 21, 2026, they were in Dakar and Saint-Louis meeting with a variety of African transformational leaders active in the domains of urban and memorial heritage, education, fintech, social entrepreneurship, infrastructure, consultancy and investment between Europe and Africa, as well as the informal economy, the circular economy and the cultural sector.

Data collection

As part of the Transformational leadership for sustainability in African contexts class, after their trip, the students were tasked with producing a 1,500-word ($\pm 10\%$) individual reflective note (IRN) analyzing the responsible leadership embodied by three transformational leaders of their choice. They first had to contextualize them according to the dimensions studied in class: micro and macro environmental fit, intercultural sensitivity, conscience, responsible innovation and shared value creation. Next, using their

own words, they had to explain the types of thoughts, deep emotions, resonance or creative energy, fresh motivation that the words, thoughts and actions of the leaders they met set off in them. The students had to find a way they felt was authentic to consider three interdependent levels of inspiration that could potentially lead to transformational learning in RME (Sipsos et al, 2008): the head (what did you learn or unlearn during this encounter? What strikes you as particularly new?); the heart (what kind of emotions did you feel and why? What does that say about yourself?); the hands (starting now, what can you do with this learning experience? What did it mean to you in terms of responsible leadership?).

Data analysis

For this study, we adopted a constructivist and phenomenological epistemological approach. The methodology employed for thematic analysis was inductive-deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006), first identifying units of meaning in each document (IRN), then gradually grouping them as first-level themes, then organizing them deductively along the Head/Heart/Hands axes, before adding transversal themes that either cut across this structure or stretched outside of it. To ensure analysis in terms of meaning complexification, we carried out an analytical triangulation (Denzin, 2012), combining the researcher's thematic analysis of the texts and that of a generative AI tool (Claude Pro, Anthropic, Sonnet 4.6). We examined and checked all the results obtained through AI. Thematic analysis carried out through this double perspective resulted in a convergence that confirmed the same major themes, in interpretative consistency (confirmed by checking the verbatim texts) and high cross-saturation (the same themes recurred in many interviews). The students consented to the anonymized use of the IRN material for research purposes. The data analyzed with generative AI was anonymized and deleted before the 30-day deadline after which data is automatically shared (<https://www.anthropic.com/legal/privacy> ; <https://privacy.claude.com/en/articles/10023548-how-long-do-you-store-my-data>).

Results

The results show a very vast multidimensional transformation, which expresses how rich this experience of meeting African transformational leaders was. We identified six cognitive themes, seven emotional themes and six learning behavioral themes, as well as three cross-cutting themes that operate across all three levels (Table 1).

Table 1: Encoding and occurrences

Code	Theme	Key content	n/16
HEAD — Cognitive transformational learning			
T1	Unlearning Western-centered references	Deconstructing the hypothesis that innovation and leadership models for the transition in Africa come from the Global North	16/16
T2	Narratives and memories as strategic identity resources	African history is a lever that can be mobilized; places of memory, museums, photographic archives, stories told orally are acts of conscious leadership	15/16
T3	Education-culture-economy symbiosis	The three domains communicate and form a fertile innovation ecosystem that holds desirable futures	14/16
T4	Network and collective aspect as conditions of durability	No leader acts alone, lasting success requires cooperation	12/16

T5	Frugal innovation as a deliberate choice	Resource-efficient tools (QR codes, clay pots, simple machines...) to save scarce resources, but also as a sustainable development strategy (livable, fair, robust).	11/16
T6	Epistemological plurality	Several historical truths co-exist, expertise is positional	5/16
HEART — Emotional transformational learning			
C1	African pride and legitimacy	Renewed awareness of the continent's potential when visiting museums, observing recognized heritage and urban monuments	16/16
C2	Biographical resonance	The leader's life path resonates with the student's biographical positioning (African, in-between, European)	15/16
C3	Wonder before the relational presence	Leadership is felt not only through organizational success but also through micro-relational behavior expressing consideration	15/16
C4	Grounded hope	Inspiration is evidenced in the empirical proof of the possibility embodying the vision	15/16
C5	Teranga sensorial experience	Knowledge is passed on through the body (smell, touch, kind welcoming atmosphere) as legitimate episteme of resonance	11/16
C6	Productive discomfort	Ambiguous knowledge raises questions but does not paralyze, inspiration breeds curiosity	7/16
C7	Gender legitimacy	Structural invisibility of female leaders in the field	1/16
HANDS — Behavioral transformational learning			
M1	Observe before acting	Listen to the market (understand needs), co-construct with all stakeholders, refuse to copy-paste external solutions	16/16
M2	Contribute to the country/continent of origin/Africa	Redirect ambition towards local impact	15/16
M3	Professional ambition is about building bridges, not climbing ladders	From individual social advancement to inclusive collective impact	14/16
M4	Circulate inspiration	Pass on to peers and younger or older networks the inspiration received	12/16
M5	Integrate CSR and impact in the professional occupation	Clarify professional goals (finance, engineering, culture, trade) around a meaningful contribution to the transition	11/16
M6	Reassert the value of your own culture	Resist cultural homogenization, dare to adopt locally rooted practices	9/16
TRANSVERSAL TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING			
X1	A responsible leader is more than an authority, he/she connects	Redefine humility and relational attention in a humanistic way, as a key mechanism of transformational leadership	16/16
X2	It is possible to reconcile ambition and consciousness	The perceived tension between ambition and consciousness is resolved by empirically meeting with responsible business models and organizations that lead in their sector	14/16
X3	Cultural identity is a resource for action	As a door to the biographical in-betweenness of bicultural students that belong to the diaspora; pride as a driving force for African students.	11/16

Discussion

We were surprised by these analytical results: the qualitatively and quantitatively rich themes along all three directions (Head/Heart/Hands), the readily shared authenticity and the points of convergence within the group combined with specificities that mirrored the students' biographical positioning (African, binational, European). All these reveal that the encounters with African transformational leaders had a powerful and multifaceted impact on the deep learning of responsible leadership.

The results are consistent with the model of normative roles (guardian, visionary, citizen), relational roles (serving, connecting, narrating) and operational roles (agent of change, architect and coach) of responsible leadership in its dialog with stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006). Transformational leaders' inspiration, rooted in their African environment, confers legitimacy and authority upon them. Their grounding (Kamdem *et al.*, 2020) bears the strong mark of African Ubuntu philosophies' relational dimension ("I am because you are"); it is efficient in creating decolonized inspiration (which although distinct from Western models has proven itself). But these roots also resonate as a "meta-narrative," which is appropriate for future transition leaders the world over. By breaking free from the frameworks inherited from colonial modernity, it becomes possible to imagine, starting in Africa, new narratives grounded in a shared terrestrial condition (Mbembe, 2020).

The study also suggests that learners' biographies play a central role in the transformative learning of transition leadership; taking into account the learners' contexts thus extends Mezirow's work (2000). Biographical resonance appears as a key mediator of the learning experience, which thereby becomes relational, as it is co-constructed in the interaction with transformational leaders and triggers a critical examination of personal identity. For African students, this questioning confirms and amplifies existing pride, but the feeling of personal efficacy is sometimes weak. For students from the diaspora, it frequently reconciles hitherto separate cultural identities. Non-African students tend to review stereotypes.

Still, a great number of inter-individual convergences were observed across all three dimensions, suggesting the existence of a transcultural generation Z. This should also lead us to consider the possibility that several biases positively shaped the results: a social desirability bias (answering the IRN, which are assessed in a course during which a positive transformation is "expected") as well as a conformity bias (the shared motivation underpinning the choice of the IRA track, which is unique).

Conclusion

From the perspective of RME in business schools, the results suggest that encounters with African transformational leaders during an immersive trip can inspire differently: by generating a deep learning of responsible leadership, these will spark in students the desire to follow a professional ambition measured against the responsibility issues they take ownership of and that future transition leaders must address. Encouraging African experiences, and more broadly experiences in the Global South, which remain too invisible in RME curricula, can only benefit learning systems for "inside-out" (Ives *et al.*, 2023) transformation. Indeed, a decolonization of knowledge is necessary in the face of ecological and social transition issues, as the roots of the extractivist model are found in the Global North, which was built on the plundering of wealth in institutionalized colonization models, and this decolonization happens in the "majority world" represented by the Global South. For Europeans, Africa no doubt plays a special role, both

geographically and historically, but it is also a “power in reserve, and a reserve of power” (Achille Mbembe) that particularly deserves to be heard nowadays.

Last but not least, transformative forms of learning (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) need to be considered both in the short term and in the long term. The IRN system as a pedagogical tool ensures deep learning, yet it is not enough to measure the learners' transformation (Pang et al, 2023): its results give a qualitative indication of the transformational process, but alone they do not measure pedagogical impact. What will matter for research will be to carry out longitudinal studies again, in six months and one year, to observe the professional evolution of this cohort with regard to responsible leadership in its three dimensions, head/heart/hands, using the current data as starting point of the students' transformation.

References

- Alheit, P. (2022). "Biographical Learning" reloaded. Theoretical grounding of a challenging approach. *Adult Education Critical Issues*, 2(1), 7-19.
- Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 9–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398410>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation reconsidered. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–84.
- Deloitte (2025). GenZ and Millennial survey, Growth and the pursuit of money, meaning and well-being. <https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/issues/work/genz-millennial-survey.html>
- Dyllick, T. (2015). Responsible management education for a sustainable world: The challenges for business schools. *Journal of Management Development*, 34(1), 16–33.
- Fullan, M., Quinn, J., & McEachen, J. (2018). *Deep learning: Engage the world, change the world*. Corwin: SAGE.
- Høgda, C., Rasche, A., Schoeneborn, D., & Scotti, L. (2021). Exploring student perceptions of the hidden curriculum in responsible management education. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 168(1), 173–193
- Ives CD, Schöpke N, Woiwode C, Wamsler C (2023). IMAGINE sustainability: integrated inner-outer transformation in research, education and practice. *Sustain Sci*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01368-3>
- Kamdem, M, Chevalier, F. & Payaud, M. (dir.) (2020). *La recherche enracinée en management : contextes nouveaux et perspectives nouvelles en Afrique*, EMS.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193–212.
- Liden, R. C., & Antonakis, J. (2009). Considering context in leadership research. *Human Relations*, 62(11), 1587–1605.

Maak, T. & Pless, N. M. (2006). "Responsible Leadership in a Stakeholder Society – A Relational Perspective." *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 66, n° 1, pp. 99-115.
DOI : 10.1007/s10551-006-9047-z

Mbembe, A. (2020). *Brutalisme*. Paris : La Découverte.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation*. Jossey-Bass.

van Noreen, D. & Beehner, C. (2021). Sustainable leadership, UNESCO competencies for SDGs, and diverse leadership models. *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, 10(1), 24-49.

Pang, G., Cox, R. C., & Acheson, K. (2023). Assessing transformative learning in international education: Critiques and new directions based on a systematic review of literature. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2023(177), 75–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20480>

Pless, N.M., & Maak, T. Responsible Leadership: Pathways to the Future. *Journal of Business Ethics* 98 (Suppl 1), 3–13 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1114-4>

Prime, N. (2021). Transformative and emancipatory pedagogies in education for sustainable development: The integrative experience of individual reflective notes. *ESCP Impact Papers*, pp. 270-275.

Russo, F., Wheeldon, A.L., Shrestha, A. & Saratchandra, M (2023). Responsible Management Education in Business Schools – High on principles but low on action: A systematic literature review. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 21(3), 1-12.

Sipos, Y., Battisti, B., & Grimm, K. (2008). Achieving transformative sustainability learning: Engaging head, hands and heart. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 9(1), 68–86. DOI: 10.1108/14676370810842193