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Employing the Ubuntu Approach as a Lens to Enhance Risk Management Skills at a Municipality

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ABSTRACT

In South African cities, the approach to risk management skills training has relied heavily on positivist research approaches. However, such professional research models tend to restrict employees' input on risk mitigation. Consequently, despite the existence of rich African philosophical approaches, such as Ubuntu, the methods of teaching and learning risk management in municipalities are ineffective. Some ineffectiveness is the result of ignorance of utilising the Ubuntu philosophy for the identification, assessment and mitigation of risks with a view to enhancing the internal operations of an organisation. The practice of Ubuntu in teaching and learning, with specific reference to risk management, encourages a culture of group solidarity in the research environment that embraces brotherhood and sisterhood for survival. The question this article seeks to answer is: How can the use of the Ubuntu philosophy as a lens enhance the risk management skills of municipal officials? A single case study was conducted at Xhariep District Municipality in the Free State. Data was collected from municipal officials through participatory action research. The article recommends a culture of integrated teamwork driven by Ubuntu principles. Such a culture will contribute to human resource development, which will improve employees' competency and self-esteem for the provision of better and higher-quality services to the Xhariep communities.

INTRODUCTION

Municipalities are faced with an array of challenges, including effective methods for the improvement of risk management. In this context, this article seeks to use the Ubuntu approach as a lens to enhance risk management skills in a municipality. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is selected as the methodology. The article presents the background information that underpins its aim. It reviews the literature on the historical origins of the Ubuntu philosophy and argues for Ubuntu as an effective approach to teaching risk management skills. It also focuses on the effectiveness of the Ubuntu approach in teaching risk management skills. It presents the theoretical framework, namely the Ubuntu philosophy that underpins the study concerning its aim. It then provides a brief discussion of the research methods, results, a recommendation and a final conclusion.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

This article aims to employ the Ubuntu philosophy as a lens that can enhance risk management skills in a municipality. Risk management is the process whereby an organisation identifies, assesses and mitigates risks (Cagliano Grimaldi and Rafele 2015). It is also explained by Managa (2012) as a process that involves monitoring projects and their finances towards sustainability. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that translates African experience into action and, with its origin in the African conception of being, highlights humanity and the spirit of togetherness in the learning environment (Ngubane 1979; Khoza 2006:xx–xxi). An Ubuntu approach facilitates collaborative problem-solving skills and advanced information-gathering processes (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA] 2012). Employing the Ubuntu philosophy as a lens entails an approach that teaches the identification, assessment and mitigation of risks through problem-solving and knowledge acquisition (Zmeyov 1998).

The literature shows that there are challenges that are critical to effective methods for teaching risk management. Goddu (2012) indicates that collaborative problem-solving is a challenge facing teaching and learning risk management skills in municipalities. Previous research projects that the Xhariep District Municipality undertook relied largely on mainstream positivist research approaches characterised by an expert-researcher-driven research process (Otukile-Mongwaketse *et al.* 2016). As observed by Otukile-Mongwaketse *et al.* (2016), this researcher-centred approach does not involve the staff in planning the skills development process. McDonald (2013) echoes this view by stating that the hierarchy present within a traditional research approach holds the researcher to be the sole producer of knowledge, operating in an autocratic relationship. In view of all that has been

mentioned so far, one may suppose that the Ubuntu approach presents multiple realities in the research processes due to the collaborative and social aspects of knowledge creation.

In addressing the challenges mentioned above, many strategies have been initiated and employed. Jozwiak (2004) states that training and the ability to work in teams is an effective method for the improvement of risk assessment. Ajewole (2014) encourages collaboration and teamwork from different departments as a solution to organisational problems. In this sense, Ubuntu is an approach that promotes sharing in education, which affirms the importance of social connectedness, interdependence, communalism, sensitivity towards others and caring for others in the learning environment (Le Roux 2000). This article argues that by infusing Ubuntu philosophy into research and teaching methods, common goals can be better achieved in Xhariep District Municipality for the benefit of the local communities. Consequently, teaching and learning would create unity and cohesion that would lead to transformation and development for humankind. The individual is absorbed into the collective, yet retains an identity as an empirical being.

A municipality is an organisation that is responsible for, among other things, skills development processes such as skills assessment (Municipal Training and Skills Development Policy 2022; Kawai and Tasaki 2016). With a focus on enhancing risk management, the basic function of municipalities is to ensure the quality provision of services to communities. In this sense, knowledge together with practical skills in risk management is crucial for cities to achieve their objectives and common goals. This article defines risk management as the process whereby an organisation identifies, assesses and mitigates risks (Cagliano Grimaldi and Rafele 2015). Similarly, Managa (2012) asserts that it also involves monitoring projects and their finances towards sustainability. The article argues that for an effective teaching and learning risk assessment process, the use and recognition of Ubuntu elements could build up teamwork and practices of Ubuntu in the family and the community at large. This is because Ubuntu philosophy is an approach that not only infuses humanity in adult teaching and learning, but also promotes ethics, values, morals and traditional African communal justice (Letseka 2014; Bangura 2005; Mbigi and Maree 2005; Dia 1996). Together these aspects of Ubuntu contribute towards effective teaching strategies for risk management and challenge the social oppression that frequently limits the potential growth of municipalities and municipal officials. In this article, Ubuntu is used as a way to encourage the use of an integrated approach to research processes and the teaching of risk management.

In Xhariep municipality, previous research projects have shown that the method of teaching risk management skills was not effective and lacked a coordinated team in research (Baliyan, Oitsile and Motlhabane 2018; Zou and Mickleborough 2015; Olaye and Onajite 2015; Meyer 2014). The risk management training processes were basically dominated by research experts and ignored the voices of

the participants. Jacobsen (2011:32) states that risk management, with specific reference to risk assessment, has ontologically been categorised as naïve positivism, cultural relativism and scientific proceduralism. In fact, this research model restricted employees' input and ignored their prior experience in the risk management teaching and learning environment. This method also discourages a culture of solidarity as the principle of Ubuntu. Consequently, Ubuntu as a lens involves a humanistic approach that sees employees as having value in their own right. Similarly, Niyitunga (2020:55) has found that this mode of learning and teaching supplanted African values and continues to perpetuate division among local communities. Consequently, the training process of the city administration board is not in line with White Paper 6 (RSA DoE 2001b), which calls for an inclusive education and training system that meets all the needs of learners and maximises their participation in the curriculum (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015). This article argues that ineffective methods for teaching risk management have implications for productivity and sustainability in the municipality. Central to this argument is the question: how can the use of the Ubuntu approach enhance risk management skills in Xhariep District Municipality?

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

There has been a debate among scholars about whether African philosophies do or do not exist (Nafukho 2016; Letseka 2000). However, Nafukho (2016) claims that African philosophies do exist since, according to Letseka (2000), "all people have a philosophy that guides the way they live, their perceptions of others, and the decisions and choices they make about every aspect of their lives". This entails that employing Ubuntu as a lens for the assessment of risks could create a spirit of togetherness in the working environment, which could lead to municipal employees' group achievement that belongs to the entire municipal community.

According to Gade (2011), Letseka (2013) and (Nkondo 2007), African philosophies exist in both unrecorded and recorded forms. In recorded forms, African philosophy, Ubuntu in particular, has appeared in writing since 1846. However, the first systematic written exposition thereof was found in the 1950s in the novels of Jordan Kush Ngubane (Lodge 1999). Before 1980, Ubuntu as an African philosophy was most commonly described as "Human nature", "Humanity" or "Humanness" (Gade 2011). This confirms that Ubuntu expresses an integrated form of an African society, which is further described as an "excellent African quality" (Davis 1936). As a philosophy and a way of life, Ubuntu is associated with many African societies and certainly those in southern Africa (Nkondo 2007:89). Ngubane (1979:113) also sees it as "the philosophy which the African experience translates into action".

In view of the abovementioned, Khoza (2006:xx–xxi) confirms that Ubuntu has its origins in the African conception of being, meaning that all of humanity has a common background and *ipso facto* belongs together. Ubuntu creates unity and cohesion in research, which leads to coordinated learning and teaching activities related to risk assessment for the transformation and development of humankind. This implies that the individual is absorbed into the collective, yet retains an identity as an empirical being. It is argued in Khoza's (2006:xx–xxi) article that Ubuntu infers "I am because you are, and you are because we are". Thus, working as a family is a viable option for managing motivation in the workplace (Carr, MacLachlan, Kachedwa and Kanyangale 1997:906). Ubuntu is necessarily an approach that could assist in the central role of collaborative learning for risk management. For instance, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* [a person is a person because of others] is a common idiom that expresses humanity across African society. All these reflect a belief system of collectiveness and interdependence with others (Nkondo 2007:89–90).

Choane (2021) found that the Ubuntu approach is a relevant one when it comes to designing and implementing an effective method of teaching risk management skills in a municipality. This is because the applicability of the Ubuntu approach to working in a team in an organisation contributes to problem-solving skills. As indicated by Karsten and Illa (2005), Ubuntu is an approach that could lay a good foundation in management. McFarlin *et al.* (1999) write that African management philosophy can be summed up in one word, namely Ubuntu. That is what characterises Afrocentric leadership as collectivism, which constitutes a common bond and ensures a collective integrated community (Shonhiwa 2006:41). According to Nyerere (1968), all human beings are regarded as members of an extended family.

Ubuntu is an approach that promotes sharing in education and training, which affirms the importance of social connectedness, interdependence, communalism, sensitivity towards others and caring for others in the learning environment (Le Roux 2000). This article argues that by infusing Ubuntu philosophy into the education research process, common goals can be reached and capacity building takes a front seat. This could be accomplished by encouraging inclusivity and connectivity in learning activities and the accommodation of learners' prior experiential knowledge, which serves as a rich resource for the foundation of their self-identity (Cooper 2011:41). As noted by Khoza (1994), Ubuntu is an approach that expresses collectiveness instead of individualism. It follows that in risk management teaching and learning processes, the Ubuntu philosophy promotes unity and rejects isolation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section focuses on the principles of Ubuntu philosophy as an appropriate lens to demonstrate the aim of the study. These principles build on one another,

interconnect and overlap, and inform the type of education at the workplace that could be guided by Ubuntu and used to promote collaborative problem-solving for the enhancement of risk assessment. These Ubuntu objectives emphasise humanity in all aspects of teaching and learning processes, which shows connectedness or the integration of knowledge acquisition in risk management. As far as the Ubuntu approach is concerned, its principles, as identified below, embody the connectedness of human beings for the benefit of collective education on risk management at the workplace.

Solidarity is related to the Ubuntu philosophy

A broader perspective has been adopted by Mbigi and Maree (2005) and Dia (1996), who argue that Ubuntu is a philosophy that believes in group solidarity. This implies that working collectively as a team in an organisation increases the competence and self-esteem of officials for the survival of the African community. Consequently, African communities are strong and capable when working as collective human beings within an organisation. Community members in a municipality could survive deprivation and poverty through interdependence and interconnectedness. Solidarity is a cornerstone of the Ubuntu philosophy. Moreover, employing the Ubuntu approach in an African learning environment for assessment of risks can improve employees' skills and enhance their identification of risks in an organisation (Nkondo 2007; Jozwiak 2004).

Ubuntu inspires sharing with fellow human beings

As an indigenous cultural norm, Ubuntu entails a positive commitment and contribution towards a group of people and their relations with each other. The holistic description of Ubuntu involves the concepts of "humanity towards others", "I am because we are" and "a person becomes human through other persons". It also implies that a person can survive with the help of other people. As an approach, Ubuntu encourages a universal bond of sharing that connects all of humanity (Chimuka 2015). In essence, Ubuntu promotes fellow human beings who perpetuate learning together and share ideas for the development of and life changes in the community (Letseka 2012; Chachine 2008). As a result, in a learning environment, Ubuntu strengthens sharing and relationships to achieve set common learning goals (Quan-Baffour 2014).

Elements of the Ubuntu philosophy

Ubuntu as a philosophy portrays an African worldview of harmony, respect, caring and passion for fellow human beings, no matter where they come from.

Humans lead gregarious lives where they are in one way or another other dependent on or connected to others. This notion is affirmed in the view that one is a human being because of being with other human beings. Human life is defined in terms of one's relationship with others, hence the need to love, respect, cooperate and share with, and have compassion for others (Quan-Baffour 2014). Indeed, without others, one ceases to be human. Louw (2010) asserts that Ubuntu inspires people to expose themselves to others, encounter the difference in their humanness and inform and enrich their own.

According to Letseka (2000), Ubuntu promotes moral norms and values such as "altruism, kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others". In other words, people living in communities that embrace Ubuntu treat others with a sense of *botho* or Ubuntu, justice and fairness (Letseka 2012:48). It means that by using a cooperative method of teaching and learning risk management skills, municipal officials could work in teams to share experiences and support one another (Quan-Baffour 2014:240).

Ubuntu cultivates teamwork

African societies are cohesive and productive in tradition, especially when working together as one family in their social grouping. The latter is confirmed by studies that have been conducted in Malawi and Tanzania, showing that among the most prominent values in African societies is the salience of the group (An Afro-centric Alliance 2001). This traditional collective action could be so strong that Africans may view success and failure in an organisation as caused by group spirits. For example, before accepting any reasonable offer, such as a promotion, an employee may seek out the ideas of other members of the group before deciding, and may even turn down the development altogether for fear of the social consequences thereof. Any successful opportunities or weaknesses are taken as a group achievement or failure that belongs to the entire community. For instance, in Eastern and Central Africa, the family remains and is likely to continue to be a centrepiece of collectivism. This is supported by Carr, MacLachlan, Kachedwa and Kanyangale (1997), who argue that working as a family is a viable option for managing motivation in the workplace.

Bangura (2005) posits the principle of Ubuntu as an approach to adult learning and teaching that is informed by humanity and the spirit of togetherness in the learning environment. In this regard, Choane (2021) has found Ubuntu to be an appropriate approach to teaching risk management at Xhariep District Municipality, as it intends to promote an integrated form of education that expresses humanity (Van der Walt 2010) and advocates collaboration in research (Murithi 2009; Muwanga-Zake 2009). The approach could also assist in the central role of the learning and teaching approach in the workplace (Waghid and Smeyers 2012).

RESEARCH METHODS

Previous research projects that the municipality undertook for training on risk management skills relied largely on mainstream positivist research methodologies characterised by an expert-researcher-driven research process (Otukile-Mongwaketse *et al.* 2016). As observed by Otukile-Mongwaketse *et al.* (2016), this approach to teaching risk management has not involved the staff in planning the skills development process. It is evident that such a professional research model restricts employees' input. Part of the problem that leads to the ineffectiveness of risk management skills is the teaching method used, which tends to be teacher-centred and ignores the Ubuntu principles of teamwork. This method is a traditional approach to teaching based on top-down dissemination of knowledge and does not encourage collaborative learning. In light of the above, PAR was selected as a methodology for the study. PAR was considered a crucial method for being able to accommodate the diversity of employee training at Xhariep District Municipality. The participatory nature and goal of PAR were central to this study because of its new ways of conceptualising and democratising the relationship between researcher and co-researcher (Netshandama and Mahlomaholo 2010:111; Kemmis 2006:473; McTaggart 1998).

A case study of Xhariep District Municipality was conducted, and data was gathered through discussion meetings, workshops and observations. Pseudonyms were used to present the responses from participants. A team of eight municipal officials and the researcher diagnosed the problem, which involves challenges surrounding the effective teaching of risk management skills at Xhariep District Municipality. In so doing, the researcher and co-researchers collaboratively took into account the principles of Ubuntu and both played a central role in decision-making, because PAR takes into account local actions to resolve social injustices. Designing a useful tool such as an Ubuntu philosophy for teaching risk management at Xhariep District Municipality, required a teaching and learning environment that was highly respectful to collectively generate lasting solutions to problems (Tetui *et al.* 2017:104).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ABSENCE OF A COORDINATED, COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING TEAM TO ENHANCE RISK MANAGEMENT SKILLS

In this section, the discussion data derived from the Xhariep District Municipality in the Free State, South Africa, are presented. The results are interpreted through the lens of Ubuntu for employing a strategy to enhance risk management skills. This is done to understand the co-researchers from the viewpoint that human beings create relationships with other persons and that true identity is revealed through interaction in the community.

Theories of collaborative learning assert that, in its essence, a joint team promotes the sharing of resources to solve problems about risk assessment (Zou and Mickleborough 2015:148). It means that by using a suitable method of teaching and learning risk management skills, municipal officials could work in teams to share experiences and support one another (Quan-Baffour 2014:240).

The SAQA (SAQA 2012:9) attests that adequate training programmes in areas of skills development and financial management provide municipal officials with the ability to identify, assess and mitigate risks. Wicks and Reason (Qhosola 2016:137) observe that a team creates an environment (positive climate) of active, involved, exploratory learning through increased involvement in the community.

Contrary to the principles of good practice, the empirical data shows an absence of teamwork at Xhariep District Municipality. This became evident during the first discussion meeting when we created a coordinated team. One of the team members, Brains, made it clear in a statement that there was no coordinated team that could work together to achieve the common goals of the municipality. Brains said, "Before I attended this group discussion, I did not know that sharing my experience on mitigating factors towards risks with my colleagues is a rich resource".

The phrase "before I attended this group discussion" implies that before the coordinated team was formed, Brains felt isolated and denied the opportunity to share his experience with his co-workers. The phrase "I did not know that sharing is a rich resource" shows that the existing structures and those holding political power excluded the contribution of municipal officials to the mitigation of risks at the municipality. The implication is that Brains has been waiting for this kind of opportunity to share and find solutions to problems that are faced in the assessment of risks at Xhariep District Municipality. Brains' feeling of isolation and being denied the opportunity of sharing his ideas with his co-workers indicates ignorance and an inability to promote Ubuntu principles to share in improving risk management skills, and a disregard for the importance of working together and strengthening caring for others in the working environment (Le Roux 2000:43).

The absence of a coordinated team was also evident from the marking of attendance registers during the discussion meetings and workshop sessions.

Table 1 provides a summary of attendance that was recorded at workshop discussions and during the observation of risk assessment learning activities. The Table reflects the presence and absence of the co-researchers at the workshop meetings, showing the lack of support of the team. The Table illustrates that there was no support structure to encourage teamwork that could offer the co-researchers an opportunity to work as a collective and solve problems the organisation faces. Besides that, co-researchers were not aware of the collaborative learning approach to the assessment of risks at the municipality. However, the literature shows that a coordinated team creates a positive climate in a working environment and increases community involvement (Qhosola 2016:137).

Table 1: Attendance register of discussion meetings

Team members	15 Jun. 2018	22 Jun. 2018	29 Jun. 2018	3 Aug. 2018
Brains	✓	✓	X	✓
Atlanta	✓	X	✓	X
Ruth	✓	✓	X	X
Zara	✓	X	X	X
Mpendulo	✓	✓	✓	X
Ralph	✓	X	X	
Shembe	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sophia	✓	✓	X	✓
Siyamthanda	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vista	X	✓	✓	X
Key: ✓ = present and X = absent				

The absence of a coordinated team became more evident when I posed the following question to the group members: “Do you have sufficient resources like teamwork for the effective implementation of risk management skills at your municipality?” At the research site, Ruth demonstrated the non-availability of teamwork through the following verbal expression: “We are experiencing these group sessions for the first time at our municipality where we are working as a group and shar[ing] ideas towards mitigation of risks”.

In the extracts above, the phrase “the first time” clearly shows that the collaborative learning approach was a new concept to the municipal employees. It means that they did not have opportunities to share their experience and expertise in risk management training programmes before the intervention of this study. There is a clear need for employing Ubuntu as a useful tool for teaching risk management at Xhariep District Municipality (Mohokare Local Municipality 2019/2020:8). Through their verbal expressions, the municipal officials showed interest in working as a team, as is clear from the word “we”. In their view, working as a team would contribute to individual skills development and delivering services to the community. What is more, words such as “we” appear more than once, which shows the connection between the co-researchers and the researcher. This is consistent with Ubuntu objectives that emphasise humanity in all aspects of teaching and learning processes, including elements such as connectedness and the integration of knowledge acquisition. Lastly, the phrase “share

ideas” means that the employees wanted to share expertise and increase hope for the Xhariep community.

Because of the lack of a coordinated team at the research site, the municipal officials could not find an opportunity to reflect and learn from other team members. The co-researchers Brains and Vista confessed as much in the same workshop when expressing excitement about this study. I observed their interest through their expression when Brains said, “This is a new approach to us, and we believe this study is going to help us,” and Vista said, “[The] municipality should be advised on [acting] hand in glove with the communities”.

The phrase “we believe this study will help us” indicates that before the start of the study, there were limited structures that could offer assistance to the co-researchers to improve their lives and achieve the objectives of the organisation. The coordinated team, therefore, gave them a platform to share their experience with community members and with me.

The participants Brains and Vista indicated the municipal employees’ deprivation of empowerment as individuals, and this perpetuated their economic situation, which contributed to poverty, deprivation and inequalities in the communities of Xhariep. The results show that people living in communities embrace Ubuntu principles by committing to treating others with a sense of humanity, justice and fairness (Letseka 2012; 2000).

In the same discussion and observation meeting, Ruth demonstrated the absence of a coordinated team by expressing her view as follows: “I used to attend a workshop offered by COGTA, and the timeframe for training looks enough to deliberate on issues of municipalities, but this approach of learning together is new to us”. Here, the phrase “I used to attend workshops” implies individual versus group risk management teaching and learning programmes before the study was conducted. It means unequal opportunities and limited efforts to unify employees as one community in programmes that train risk management skills.

The use of “I” and “we” or “us” in this observation in the workshop discussions provides the opportunity to acknowledge that there are discursive practices that affect effective teaching of risk assessment at Xhariep District Municipality. These findings point to social ills influenced by power relations in social structures such as local municipalities. The inability to work as a team when solving issues at the local level is seen and needs to be addressed if one believes in the emancipation agenda using the Ubuntu approach.

RECOMMENDATION

The recommendation is that there is a need for a coordinated team using an Ubuntu approach to teach risk management at a municipality. The responsibility

of the team should involve planning and monitoring municipal projects and finances towards sustainability. The team should recognise community members' background experience when planning projects and contributing to knowledge-building and practical strategies to assess risks.

A collaborative problem-solving team is recommended as an empowering, critical and reflexive tool for teaching risk management skills and thinking about the diversity of experiences in the identification and assessment of risks at a municipality. Placing the team front and centre in the adult teaching and learning environment will help the municipality and its officials mitigate risk factors.

CONCLUSION

A coordinated team led by the spirit and values of Ubuntu would also enhance confidence and job satisfaction, which could contribute positively towards better service delivery and improvement of the lives of municipality employees and the people they serve. The ability to empower one another in teamwork aimed at successful implementation could mitigate risks at the organisation.

NOTE

* This article is partly based on a doctoral thesis that was completed under the supervision of Prof Sechaba Mahlomaholo at the University of the Free State. M.P. Choane 2021. *Enhancing risk management skills at a municipality using an adult education approach*. Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Studies. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

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