Western Management styles and African culture – on misfits in industrial organization in Southern Africa

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South Africa is a post-colonial country. A as consequence there is a co-existence of an industrial sector that was originally established by immigrants, and a mostly manual and informal sector that is established and operated by African citizens. The informal and service sectors lack productivity and skilled services due to lacks of infrastructure, management and technical skills. The industrial and highly skilled sector however lack productivity mostly due to management problems. Despite low labour costs the cost per unit is often higher than in plants located in first world countries.

One major reason for this has to be sought in the cultural incompatibility between the company management according to international (in fact western) management principles and the African culture. Despite formal arrangements the informal cooperation is complicated due to many cultural clashes that are not communicated. Further productivity lacks as workers on the shop floor level do not identify themselves with the expected behavior and work ethos.

This conceptual paper discusses the development of the industrial sector mostly in Europe and its impact on the working culture and the society. This is then mirrored to the African tradition of Ubuntu, of community, sharing and distributing responsibilities. Form both perspectives a synthesis is drawn that shall help to explain the difficulties of implementing western management styles in an African context. Further, concepts for an African management (that is mostly compatible to the African cultures) that provides a maximum efficiency are concluded.