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Inclusive, Ethical, and Youth-Integrated Leadership: Lessons from Nigeria



Monique Jackson-Reynolds



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Monique Jackson-Reynolds, M.Ed.
Technology Integration Literacy Specialist and Lecturer
The Mico University College
Kingston, Jamaica

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do."
-Eleanor Roosevelt

Overview

The success of any team, organization or nation relies heavily on the leaders, their skills, styles and core values. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its global uncertainties and national calamities, showed a plethora of varied leadership styles amidst the aims for survival and recovery. Women in Nigeria exhibited leadership primarily through grassroots community initiatives, frontline healthcare service, and collective economic action, although they remained significantly underrepresented in formal government decision-making bodies (Adegbite et al., 2022). Post-pandemic results included the #EndSARS movement that extended beyond the immediate call for police reform to encompass broader shifts in governance, digital agency, and political structure. This propelled the awakening of Civic Agency and Digital Literacy, where young Nigerians used infographics, threads, and livestreams to educate their peers about constitutional rights and legal frameworks (Uwalaka & Nwala, 2025). Through these milestone occurrences in Nigeria, various leadership styles and their effects on the population unfolded, blazing the trail for innovative opportunities to continue the development of the nation.

Authentic leadership and servant leadership are both categorized as Values-Based Leadership (VBL) styles, which emerged or resurfaced in response to widespread ethical and moral failures in corporate and political leadership at the start of the 21st century. While they share a foundational commitment to morality, they differ in their theoretical positioning and primary focal points. Both leadership styles are rooted in morality and ethics, with leaders described as altruistically motivated and demonstrating a genuine concern for people (Brown & Treviño, 2006, as cited in Copeland, 2014). Both styles are instrumental in fostering positive organizational outcomes, such as high levels of trust, psychological safety, and job satisfaction (Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023; Zhu, 2006). Both prioritize the development and empowerment of followers, seeking to help subordinates reach their full potential and assume responsibility within the organization. Leaders in both frameworks are expected to lead by example, maintaining consistency between their words and actions to serve as moral role models (Bwalya, 2023; Cougot et al., 2025).

VALUES-BASED LEADERSHIP

The defining characteristic of authentic leadership is self-awareness and the ability to be "true to oneself", focusing on internal processes like balanced information processing and relational transparency (Cougot et al., 2025; Zhu, 2006). In contrast, servant leadership focuses primarily on serving others, where the leader's main priority is the well-being and growth of their followers (Bwalya, 2023). Authentic leadership is often theoretically viewed as a "root construct" or antecedent to all other positive leadership styles, meaning a leader must be authentic before they can effectively practice other styles like servant or transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 2004, as cited in Zhu, 2006; Copeland, 2014). Servant leadership is more explicitly externally focused on the mission and the community, often viewing work as a vocation and prioritizing collaboration and teamwork. Authentic leadership focuses more on self-realization and ensuring that one's daily life and leadership behaviours are a true reflection of their deeply held personal values (Ilies et al., 2005, as cited in Copeland, 2014; Zhu, 2006).

Background

In Nigeria, women's groups served as critical platforms for female leadership during the crisis. Women within these groups acted as "change agents," utilizing their social networks to disseminate vital health information regarding preventive behaviours, such as the importance of handwashing, social distancing, and the use of face masks (Adegbite et al., 2022). Beyond information sharing, these leaders coordinated collective action to mitigate the pandemic's impact by building community infrastructure; the construction of handwashing stations and developed community action plans to prevent the spread of the virus. Innovative economic shifts: Women leaders organized members to pivot from traditional businesses (like selling food at schools) toward producing and selling masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) to meet community needs (Adegbite et al., 2022).

Qualitative findings indicate that women's groups provided a leadership structure to support members in acute need, helping to reduce gender-based violence and connecting women to new income opportunities (Agene & Onyishi, 2020). Women constituted most of the healthcare and social services workforce in Nigeria, placing them at the forefront of the pandemic response (Ilesanmi & Agu, 2024). As frontline workers, they were essential stakeholders in managing the public health challenge, providing care, and maintaining essential maternal and child health services. These illustrations are direct examples of servant leadership. This type of leadership is characterized by "visioning, hope, and faith" while viewing work as a service vocation (Bwalya, 2023).

The #EndSARS movement represents a historic turning point in Nigeria, functioning as both a rejection of systemic violence and a catalyst for a new era of political consciousness among the country's tech-savvy youth. This has created a politically aware generation capable of using technology to bypass traditional gatekeepers and document state actions in real-time. The Movement as a Means to Salvage Nigerian Youth. The movement was fundamentally motivated by a need to salvage the lives and futures of young Nigerians who were disproportionately targeted by systemic failures. It was born from the "egregious violations" of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit synonymous with the profiling, extortion, and extrajudicial killing of young Nigerians (Inagbor et al., 2023). By demanding an end to this unit, the youth sought to reclaim their basic right to safety and dignity. We see here how this movement displays authentic leadership where the leader's values, emotions, and self-regulation are evident through their goals and actions (Zhu, 2006).

From this modern revolution, we see a transformation of the political landscape that has a significant long-term impact through the evolution of protest energy into formal political action, specifically the "Obidient movement" (Oluwatoye, 2023). By channelling their dissatisfaction with the status quo into a "third force" political party, the youth successfully challenged the long-standing duopoly of Nigerian politics and increased voter registration among young people. This shift has levelled the political playing field, allowing the average Nigerian to voice complaints and call for change without relying on traditional "godfatherism". While structural reforms remain a work in progress, the movement forced the government to establish judicial panels of inquiry across 28 states to investigate police abuses. These panels believed and verified numerous petitions regarding extrajudicial killings and brutality, creating an official record of state-sponsored "massacres" that had previously been denied (Adediran, 2021).



The movement fostered a collective "Soro Soke" (Speak Up) identity, breaking through ethnic, class, and religious divides to unify the youth under a common goal of social justice (Igwe, 2021). Beyond police brutality, the protests confronted the systemic structures that perpetuate poverty and limited access to basic services like education and healthcare (Adeez, 2009). Young Nigerians used the movement to protest a political system perceived as "unresponsive and indifferent" to their needs. It represented an impassioned demand for a more inclusive and accountable government that prioritizes the welfare of its largest demographic. The movement has provided a powerful roadmap for resistance and political inclusion; the "ghosts" of #EndSARS remain a persistent reminder that the struggle for a just and accountable society in Nigeria is ongoing (Aidonojie et al., 2021). The results from this movement also demonstrate examples of transformational leadership where leaders provide meaning to work by fostering team spirit and optimism. They encourage followers to envision attractive future states and set challenging personal objectives (Bass et al., 2003).

To move forward effectively, Nigeria must transition toward an inclusive, ethical, and youth-integrated leadership that prioritizes structural reforms and constructive engagement with its citizens. Nigeria should focus on transitioning from a "gerontocratic" political structure toward a truly representative democracy that reflects its status as a youth-dominated nation (Maxwell, 2025; Oluwatoye, 2023). This requires dismantling the long-standing systems of "godfatherism" and patronage that have historically sidelined young Nigerians. Future leadership must move beyond treating youth as "election foot soldiers" and instead actively include them in core policy-making processes and party leadership structures (Inagbor et al., 2023; Maxwell, 2025). A core focus must be the institutionalization of ethical leadership and transparency to restore public trust eroded by decades of systemic corruption (Moka et al., 2025; Daniel et al., 2016). This involves: Establishing transparent leadership structures within both the government and political parties and implementing independent oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability in governance and resource management (Moka et al., 2025) and integrating ethical education into civic programs to foster a more responsible and informed political class.

Leadership for Good

Leadership must pivot from authoritarian intolerance toward "adaptive governance," which prioritizes constructive engagement with citizens' demands rather than suppression (Inagbor et al., 2023). This requires: Ongoing dialogue between the government and civil society to address the root causes of social discontent, such as police brutality, economic injustice, and the use of digital platforms to facilitate interactive and two-way communication between officials and their constituents (Maxwell, 2025)

Future leadership must focus on comprehensive institutional changes that safeguard the fundamental rights of all Nigerians. Implementing systemic changes to address brutality and ensure accountability within security agencies (Inagbor et al., 2023). Developing policies that dismantle socio-economic inequalities and provide equitable access to education and employment for the marginalized (Inagbor et al., 2023). Protecting digital agency and ensuring equal access to information technology as a foundation for modern civic participation (Apata, 2025). Leadership should harness the innovative and tech-savvy nature of the younger generation to drive digital reforms in government (Maxwell, 2025). Utilizing technology can improve transparency and service delivery, effectively modernizing the Nigerian state to meet 21st-century challenges.



Female leaders can re-engineer the future of Nigeria by leveraging digital agency, modelling transparent governance, and prioritizing legislative reforms that address gender-based violence and systemic socio-economic neglect. The #EndSARS movement highlighted the power of female leaders like FK Abudu, Rinu Oduala, and DJ Switch, who used their digital literacy to maximize visibility and coordinate national attention. DJ Switch's use of Instagram Live to document the Lekki Toll Gate shooting functioned as a form of "digital witnessing" that successfully contested state narratives and garnered international condemnation. Furthermore, activists such as Serah Ibrahim and Dabira Ayuku provided credible, believable testimony to judicial panels, proving that female leaders are essential in creating an official record of history and pursuing justice for human rights abuses.

The Feminist Coalition, a youth-led female group, redefined political organization by operating with high levels of transparency. They used digital platforms to share real-time financial statements and efficiently allocate resources—ranging from legal aid to medical supplies—modelling a new dynamic for public service that counters the traditional "money politics" and corruption seen in the current political order. This approach demonstrates how female leaders can build trust and legitimacy through ethical leadership and "publics of practice". Female leaders are at the forefront of "justice-oriented literacies" by using digital storytelling to challenge rape culture and gender-based violence. Movements such as #ArewaMeToo in Northern Nigeria have allowed women to use anonymity and hashtag-based narratives to resist violence and push for policy dialogues in states where these issues are often suppressed.

Additionally, leaders can draw from the #ShutItAllDown movement in Namibia to organize collective resistance against femicide and demand structural reforms in law enforcement and justice systems. To ensure sustainable change, female leaders must push for the institutionalization of gender quotas within political party leadership structures. Because the current system is often moderated by intersectional factors like class and ethnicity that exclude women, formal rules are necessary to break the "gerontocratic" and patriarchal grip on the political jugular. By advocating for the reduction of nomination fees and campaign expenses, female leaders can lower the financial barriers that prevent marginalized women from seeking elective office.

To genuinely care for the people of Nigeria, the country must transition toward a leadership style defined by adaptive governance, ethical transparency, and inclusive representation that moves away from traditional authoritarian and patronage-based systems. An ideal leadership style would prioritize "adaptive governance," which focuses on engaging constructively with citizens' demands rather than resorting to suppression. This style is characterized by a shift away from the "authoritarian intolerance" and military-style force historically used to manage social movements (Inagbor et al., 2023; Igwe, 2021). Instead of dismissing grievances, care-oriented leaders should foster sustained dialogue between the government and civil society to address the root causes of social discontent (Inagbor et al., 2023).

Implications for Leading

I have gained such invaluable insight from this study, which led me to reflect on where I fit in regarding leadership and the development of my own country. As an educator at the tertiary level, my influence on youth leadership development has been impactful. Assessing my leadership style, I realize that, beyond the traditional description of transactional leadership, which is characterized by a process of negotiation and exchange between the leader and the follower to achieve established goals (Burns, 1978), I prefer transformational leadership that focuses on a long-term philosophy where short-term, egotistic goals are replaced by higher-ranked values and ideals. It is a shared process where the leader inspires followers to transcend their own self-interest for the good of the organization (Bass, 1985). I also realise that I have been using, to some extent, the Leader-Member Exchange theory where my unique interpersonal connection is developed through charismatic interactions with my student teachers. This has truly resulted in my students being motivated and energized through mentoring, personal relationships, and high yet reasonable expectations.

To restore public trust, leadership must be rooted in "ethical leadership" and absolute transparency. This involves establishing independent oversight mechanisms and "transparent leadership structures" ensures that the welfare of the people is not sacrificed for the personal gain of political elites (Moka et al., 2025). Genuinely caring leadership must respect the rule of law and judicial findings, such as those from the #EndSARS panels, to facilitate "genuine healing and reconciliation" rather than engaging in state-sponsored denials or cover-ups (Adediran, 2021). Ethical leaders must discourage the "monetization of activism" and "protest commercialization," which often dilute genuine social demands for personal pecuniary gain (Moka et al., 2025). Reducing the financial cost of political entry—such as nomination fees—is essential to ensure that leadership is not restricted to a wealthy elite class (Maxwell, 2025).

Leadership that cares for the people must prioritize structural and socio-economic reforms that address everyday survival. This includes shifting funding priorities to address "maternal and neonatal deaths" in underserved areas and "inaccessible healthcare" for rural women (Adediran, 2021), investing in human capital: focusing on "education, skill development, and job creation" to empower the marginalized and dismantle socio-economic inequalities (Inagbor et al., 2023) and recognizing that digital literacy is a cornerstone of modern "civic agency," leadership should protect digital platforms as spaces for alternative political engagement (Apata, 2025; Igwe, 2021).

Genuinely caring leadership should foster beneficial leadership styles among the youth. While authentic leadership (AL) and servant leadership (SL) are rarely "taught" in a traditional lecture-based sense, they can be effectively developed and fostered through planned interventions, experiential learning, and systemic organizational support. Traditional theoretical approaches are often criticized for failing to provide the feedback loops between practice and reflection necessary to acquire these complex personal skills. Longitudinal research demonstrates that a three-year training program based on action learning—working on real problems in a supportive yet confrontational environment—leads to significant increases in self-reported AL (Baron, 2016). Rather than a trainer guiding participants through content, these programs provide the "drive and energy" for leaders to implement changes and take responsibility for their own behavior.

Intensive leadership camps using collaborative action games serve as "trigger events" that disrupt routines and force leaders to examine their conduct from new perspectives (Corriveau, 2020). This method is effective because it teases out instinctive behaviours, which can then be analysed through rigorous reflection and feedback. Immersion in remote wilderness without modern facilities has been shown to increase all components of AL (van Droffelaar & Jacobs, 2018). The psychological effects of nature—such as stress reduction and increased self-awareness—act as catalysts for intrapersonal change. Research in the Indian financial sector suggests that organizations can proactively enhance AL by using both individual and interpersonal triggers to prompt self-reflection (Nair et al., 2021).



Conclusion

To develop servant leadership, facilitators can focus on prioritizing the needs of followers and the community. Its development is supported by specific training frameworks: Participating in community-based projects, such as mentoring at-risk youth, has been shown to help aspirant professionals develop core SL attributes like empathy, humility, and altruistic calling (Robinson & Magnusen, 2024). This process is most effective when it includes a cycle of experience, reflection, and application. Studies on school heads indicate that coaching strategies based on models like the "Leader Growth Engine" (LGE) significantly improve SL qualities (Ngussa et al., 2024). This involves gaining new knowledge, deliberate practice, and prayerful or deep reflection. While observable behaviors—such as deep listening, coaching, and decision transparency—are trainable, certain core dispositions like integrity and genuine humility are considered "non-teachables" (Rao, 2024). Therefore, organizations should "hire for character" and "train for skill".

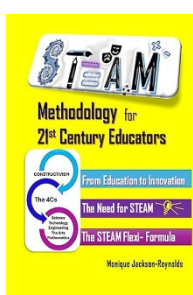
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Monique Jackson-Reynolds is a Technology Integration Literacy Specialist and a Lecturer of Language, Literacy and Literature at the Mico University College in Kingston, Jamaica, and the author of [STEAM Methodology for 21st Century Educators: Strategic Integration, Fostering Student Assimilation and Scaffolding Innovation](#) (2025), which has been received with wide acclaim. Monique is a respected thought leader and speaker, inspiring educators with her celebration of discovery, creativity, and excellence in education. [in](#) [✉](#)

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