

## Growing a new generation of accountable African techno-professionals in health

Francis Omaswa ponders on the mindset required for individuals to become the leaders that are needed to effect positive change



In our last discussion we placed a heavy responsibility for transforming the health status of African populations on technical and professional leaders. We agreed that this time round we will discuss how we can produce a critical mass of techno-professionals who will design and drive the reforms that are needed and to close the gap between what needs to be done and what is actually happening on the ground.

Every activity is impacted by the surrounding environment in which it takes place and our behaviour is in real life a response to what is happening in our surroundings. In our previous discussions we have referred to the good old times when African techno-professionals were confident, motivated high performers. This was largely because there was a prevailing enabling environment for them. We have also discussed how this changed for the worse, bringing in its entrails loss of confidence and poor performance. We have mentioned and welcomed the current era of a new hope for Africa with economies growing at 5% and above, more democracy, louder voices of civil society, and a globalised world where we are all watched and are subject to international codes and norms.

While this gives us hope, the journey is still long and hard. In most of our countries, it is very hard for professionals to pursue excellence. The working conditions are not conducive, with inadequate pay, a weak workplace resource support base, highly dependent society with heavy demands from extended family and colleagues, no social security and low pension, corruption with some colleagues getting too rich too quickly, and bad politics, including nepotism, sectarianism, etc.

We have no choice but to change this! For all this to change for the better we have to develop current and future leaders who have faith in the future of our countries and who are motivated to act as change agents.

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Francis Omaswa, CEO, African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation; Founding Executive Director of the Global Health Workforce Alliance.

Even in these apparently difficult conditions, I have seen techno-professionals who have made a difference.

What should we do? The first step is to acknowledge that it starts with each one of us as individuals. We have to start to take responsibility and be the leaders that we should be... leading to change, aiming for continuous performance improvement, and above all being role models for the younger generation and for society. This commitment is taken at a personal level, just as you would decide to join a religion or some other network. Mentorship is the traditional way in which health professionals were always brought up since the days of Hippocrates. Let us create positive workplace environments where younger colleagues feel welcome and at home. If there are no young people hanging around you then you should immediately realise that something is wrong with your leadership. Let us spot talent, nurture and develop future leaders, and not see them as threats. Let us embrace all of them irrespective of their origins and devoid of sectarian considerations. My own experience is that talented people are generally reliable; once you win their trust, they will stick with you irrespective of all other considerations. I am what I have turned out to be due to a number of influences: my genes, my early childhood upbringing, and equally important, the role models that influenced my development as a young professional.

I also have a message for the younger colleagues. During the last 2 years, as part of the sub-Saharan African Medical Schools Study ([www.SAMSS.ORG](http://www.SAMSS.ORG)), we spoke to many students from many medical schools. One of the statements that struck me most is from a group of students who asserted that they also want 'to be like the others', in other words to live well and get there quickly too. I appeal to the younger professionals to exercise patience and to commit themselves to growing up into the techno-professional leaders that Africa is beckoning them to be. There is plenty of room at the top for young professionals who persevere and pursue excellence. I know this because I have seen it.