

African American Management History

Second Edition

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African American Management History: Insights on Gaining a Cooperative Advantage

Second Edition

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2019

Second edition 2025

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-959-9 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-956-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-958-2 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To
Jadon & Levi*

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Foreword

Nearly a decade ago, I came to a belated realization. I was having a meal in London with Zhang Ruimin who was then the CEO of the Chinese white goods company Haier. Mr Zhang is an astonishingly well-read man from business to philosophy with plenty of ports of call in between. One of the subjects he came to was the legacy of Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management. On this, at least, I felt I could contribute. I knew a little of Taylor's work: the multitalented American engineer had championed the idea of scientific management in the early 20th century. The central premise of this was that managers need data to manage. In the classic case, Taylor advised a manager to stand by with a stopwatch as a worker digs a hole. When the hole is complete, the manager is armed with information on how long is required for a worker to dig a hole. Productivity and performance can then be managed. Big data in an age of small data!

In the western view, Taylor gave managers power over those who fulfilled the tasks. The manager with the clipboard and stopwatch is an archetypal figure in 20th-century organizational life – and, depressingly, in some 21st-century organizations. There was a pause. Mr Zhang looked slightly perplexed. “That is not how we understand scientific management,” he said before going onto explain that in the Chinese view Frederick Taylor's experiments gave power not to the manager but to the worker. It was the efforts of the worker which enabled the manager, and the data created were there to protect the worker. He reminded me that among Taylor's many fans was Lenin.

My realization was that management is universally applied but interpreted in very different ways in different cultures and contexts. There really is no one best way but a profusion of best ways. More recently, I visited the Japanese construction company Shimizu. Sitting in an office with a fantastic view of Tokyo – and many of the buildings his company was responsible for – Shimizu CEO Kazuyuki Inoue was quick to explain that a key figure in the company's development was Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931). Shibusawa was a remarkable Japanese industrialist who is now regarded widely as the “father of Japanese capitalism.” Among the tools of capitalism which Shibusawa introduced into Japan were double-entry bookkeeping, joint-stock corporations, and note-issuing banks. Shibusawa was an investor in a panoply of corporations as well as founding the Tokyo Stock Exchange, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, and the Japan Red Cross. He did not take a controlling stake in any company and espoused a socially responsible brand of capitalism. He argued that “the Analects and the abacus are inseparable”

meaning that philosophy and ethics are indispensable parts of business practice. In effect, Shibusawa was talking about sustainability more than a century ago.

Wherever you look management has a rich and varied history. It is awash with inspirational characters and different interpretations of what is right and wrong, what is important, and what is not. In their work, Leon Prieto and Simone Phipps have done the world of management practice and study an important service by exploring new, sometimes criminally neglected, areas of management history. As I have read their work on ideas such as “Ubuntu” and people like Maggie Lena Walker and Charles Clinton Spaulding, I have been constantly struck by how little I know but also how management has huge potential to be a force for good.

Leon and Simone’s powerful championing of cooperative advantage as an idea in keeping with our times demonstrates the timeless brilliance of the ideas they explore in *African American Management History*. Their work makes it clear that the manager is not a passive figure with a clipboard but an activist for change within and beyond organizations.

Management has the power to bring people and organizations together. In a world beset with huge challenges – from climate change to the ethics of AI – the one thing we can all agree on is that meeting these challenges requires us to unite, collaborate, and cooperate. Management enables just that. As Leon and Simone make clear, management is the art and science of bringing people together to make change happen. *African American Management History* is a celebration but also a call to arms and a call to activism to achieve change in organizations and the world.

Stuart Crainer
Co-founder of Thinkers50 (thinkers50.com).

Acknowledgments

We extend our deepest gratitude to Emerald Publishing and their dedicated team. Their unwavering support and opportunity have been instrumental in bringing this second edition to life. A heartfelt acknowledgment is due to Thinkers50, The Thinklist, Talking About Organizations Podcast, USASBE, Clayton State University, Middle Georgia State University, and Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation, whose invaluable support has significantly magnified the reach and impact of our work.

We reserve a special mention for the remarkable individuals whose support has been pivotal: Todd Bridgman, Stephen Cummings, Lila Maclellan, Tiffani Bova, Neil Stott, Paul Tracey, Stuart Crainer, Des Dearlove, and Monika Kosman. Their involvement not only has enriched this journey but also has been vital in fostering the growth and recognition of *African American Management History*. To them, and to the many others who have lent their support and expertise, we are profoundly thankful. Your collective efforts have helped shape this endeavor into something far greater than we could have achieved alone.

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An Introduction to African American Management Thought

There is a term from the Akan people of Ghana that is known as *Sankofa*, which means, “go back and get it.” This is precisely what we should consider doing to achieve managerial and entrepreneurial success. In this book, we are asking individuals to consider reflecting on African traditions and start utilizing some of the philosophies from the past in order to reclaim the future. It is important to learn about and be proud of African traditions and philosophies because embracing diverse voices and perspectives not only enriches our understanding but also challenges the dominant narratives that have, for too long, marginalized and silenced the contributions of the African diaspora. By weaving the threads of African wisdom into our modern tapestry of management and entrepreneurship, we can craft holistic solutions that are grounded in equity, inclusivity, and social justice. The future of successful, sustainable, and equitable organizations hinges on our collective ability to learn from, honor, and apply the profound insights of African traditions.

This book demonstrates that there were individuals of African descent who also made significant contributions and that African American Management Thought that was practiced during the period 1900–1930 (otherwise called “the Golden Age of Black business” by famed historian Dr Juliet Walker), was influenced by traditional African systems of cooperation, and not just by the capitalist economic system. William Clarence Matney, one of the first African American, Harvard Business Graduates (class of 1920) once said that “co-operation offers great promise of being the solution for the economic riddle confronting the Negro” (Matney, 1930).

When slavery ended, African Americans were thrust in a world where they needed to understand the tenets of capitalism and a free market economy in a country that didn’t allow them to be truly *free* citizens of the United States. The newly emancipated African Americans did not possess financial wealth, but many still possessed the knowledge and traditions that were passed down from Africa, including traditional systems of cooperation that were practiced on the continent. Contrary to popular belief, Africans were engaged in trade and other

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economic activities. They either produced market goods or operated as traders, brokers, and merchants (Walker, 1998). In addition, the production of goods and trade and marketing activities were propelled by a high degree of both individual and communally based profit-oriented activities (Walker, 1998).

Jaja of Opobo is just one example of a leader who was very entrepreneurial in precolonial Nigeria. He has been described by scholars as perhaps the most enterprising and accomplished of all African merchant princes on the west coast of Africa in the 19th century (Fajana & Biggs, 1976). A British palm oil merchant by the name of Alexander Cowan went to the city of Opobo on business and said the following:

There can be no doubt Ja-Ja was the most powerful potentate the Oil Rivers ever produced. He was just as shrewd and fore-seeing as he was powerful ... He could be stern, and he was strict, but he was always just, and the form of government he set up was as near perfect as anything of its kind could be. Every man had the right of appeal, and, though in effect his own authority was never questioned, he conformed to his own rules, and governed through his council of chief (Pedler, 1974).

Jaja of Opobo is one of Nigeria's first modern capitalist and entrepreneurial giants who built a large business empire, and he received praise for his ability in organizing his commercial enterprise (Rotimi & Ogen, 2008). However, in Africa, traditional systems of cooperation played a major role in influencing management and entrepreneurship. According to Nzelibe (1986), African management thought emphasized communalism and cooperative teamwork. This stems from the belief that the individual is not alone but belongs to the community. For instance, if a misfortune such as death befalls a family, it is viewed as a misfortune not for the family alone, but for the entire community (Nzelibe, 1986).

Traditional systems of cooperation existed in almost all African societies and have remained vibrant even in contemporary times, in rural areas and in the urban informal economy (Schwettmann, 2014). In addition, rotating savings and credit associations such as *sou sou* (in Ghana and Trinidad & Tobago), *partner* (in Jamaica), *box hand* (in Guyana), and *chama* (in Kenya) are pervasive in Africa and its Diaspora and involve large numbers of people, usually for the purpose of saving money in order to open small businesses, purchase property and livestock, and fulfill other purposes for which funds are needed (Hossein, 2016). Social capital and trust are of utmost importance since these groups may handle large amounts of cash without any collateral or security, and there are usually no written agreements (Hossein, 2016; Schwettmann, 2014).

They often include an element of mutual social assistance in addition to the savings and credit function (Hossein, 2016; Schwettmann, 2014). For example, burial societies, which are a form of microinsurance, are often found in Southern Africa and Ethiopia. Also, in Cuba during the times of slavery, many enslaved Africans belonged to *cabildos* (a type of mutual aid society) that provided members with assistance related to healthcare, burial expenses, and religious

ceremonies (Concha-Homes, 2013). The cabildos were an important institution to maintain African traditions and philosophies. Mutual work-sharing schemes for labor-intensive ventures such as house construction or crop harvesting can be found everywhere in Africa and its Diaspora. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, there is a philosophy that is still practiced that came from West Africa known as *gayap* which means “lend a hand,” and it involves the tradition of the community coming together to achieve a common goal such as helping to build a neighbor’s home without pay (Brereton, 1996).

Within the African American community, there have been efforts to reclaim African traditions and philosophies, and in 1966, Dr Maulena Karenga did just that by creating the African American holiday of Kwanzaa. This holiday incorporated what Karenga called the seven principles of African heritage: (1) Umoja (unity), (2) Kujichagulia (self-determination), (3) Ujima (collective work and responsibility), (4) Ujamaa (cooperative economics), (5) Nia (purpose), (6) Kuumba (creativity), and (7) Imani (faith). Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa was dedicated to the principles which embodied a communitarian African philosophy (Karenga, 1989).

A prominent African tradition that embodies the spirit of cooperation within African societies is “Ubuntu” in Southern Africa, which can be translated to mean “I am, because we are.” According to Mangaliso (2001),

Ubuntu can be defined as humaneness – a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness – that individuals and groups display for one another. Ubuntu is the foundation for the basic values that manifest themselves in the ways African people think and behave toward each other and everyone else they encounter.

It is important to note that Maat, a philosophical principle of rightness, truth, and justice that regulated the activities and socioeconomic exchanges of individuals (Obenga, 1996, 2004), embodies African humanism and it predates Ubuntu (Zoogah, 2020, 2021). Ubuntu, however, has gained renewed prominence, largely due to global figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who not only lived by its philosophy but also brought it to international recognition, showcasing its relevance in promoting social harmony and collective responsibility.

According to Bangura (2005), there are three main tenets of Ubuntu, namely, (1) spirituality (spirit of care and community), (2) dialogue, and (3) consensus-building. It is recommended that managers and leaders be guided by these tenets when they lead organizations (Bangura, 2005; Nafukho et al., 2011).

Spirituality

The philosophy of Ubuntu calls for managers and leaders to attend to the spiritual needs of the people they serve (Nafukho et al., 2011). It should be noted, however, that spirituality does not have to pertain to religion or religiousness. Spirituality can also embrace values, finding meaning and purpose in work,

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interconnectedness with others, as well as being part of a community, and it can encompass virtually every positive human experience such as love, hope, thankfulness, appreciation, harmony, peace, and comfort (Badrinarayanan & Madhavaram, 2008; Koenig et al., 2001).

Later in this book, you will learn that the management style of Charles Clinton (C.C.) Spaulding, a Black business pioneer, was based on his spirituality. This was not surprising because in African societies, spirituality plays a significant role in uniting people to live in harmony as a community (Nafukho, 2007). Spaulding did just that by creating a strong organizational culture within the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company (The Mutual) which was grounded in unity, fairness, and caring for one another. Spaulding's style of management, the primacy of religion, reverence for the founders, a sense of mission and family, and a firm commitment to racial cooperation and uplift combined to form the salient features of the company's culture (Weare, 1973). Spaulding once said that

before every board meeting, I stop outside the boardroom to ask myself this question: Am I fit to be an executive? This repeated check on humility always reminds me that I am an instrument of God. His ideas direct our company policy (Spaulding, 1951).

According to Nafukho et al. (2011), the founding fathers of great institutions must be remembered and respected. Ubuntu also promotes a deep respect and regard for beliefs and practices which are intended to guide employees within an organization (Nafukho et al., 2011). Spaulding also subscribed to this based on his establishment of a work culture known as the "Mutual Spirit." For example, the "Forum," which will be discussed later in this book, was implemented as a way to increase company spirit, and it expressed much of the Mutual's personality. Spaulding fashioned it after a devotional ceremony he saw at a Black fraternal society and it incorporated elements of spirituality and rituals (Weare, 1973).

To achieve a *cooperative advantage*, organizations should play a role in promoting the "spiritual" values (e.g., engendering a spirit of caring and community) of the enterprise that were espoused by the founder(s). Unfortunately, however, many individuals today do not know the history of the organizations that they work for. It is especially important for Black businesses to educate their employees of the firm's rich legacy and how they intend to chart a way forward by learning from the past. Doing so may let employees know that they are part of something meaningful and that they are also making history based on their contributions.

Dialogue

To achieve a cooperative advantage, organizational leaders should play a role in promoting dialogue to develop a culture that embraces learning from others and to find solutions to various problems facing the organization. According to Nafukho et al. (2011), managers and leaders must engage in dialogue to become closer to the people they lead and to understand the psychological, spiritual, and

physical needs of their employees. Dialogue also plays a role in managers appearing more authentic and caring.

The dialogue tenet of ubuntu calls for leaders and managers to exhibit a willingness to learn from others, as a way of building their own wisdom and knowledge base (Nafukho et al., 2011). Managers and leaders are encouraged to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values, customs, and norms which make up an organization (Nafukho et al., 2011). To understand the diversified thinking of people, dialogue is important (Nafukho et al., 2011). Even Spaulding learned from others to develop his prowess as an organizational leader. His university educated secretary and vice president, John Moses Avery, played a significant role in helping Spaulding polish his image as a respected business leader and national figure by working with him to improve his public speaking and business correspondence (Weare, 1973). Spaulding's relationship with his directors was democratic, and he relied on them for advice and expertise (Rutledge, 1943).

True dialogue allows two-way communication between message senders and receivers, where both parties engage in active listening and genuinely attempt to understand each other's perspectives. This aids the learning process and helps with the consensus-building tenet, as cooperation is fostered.

Consensus-building

According to Bangura (2005), African traditional culture has an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation. African style democracy operates in the form of lengthy discussions. Even though there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, every individual gets an equal chance to speak up until an agreement, consensus, or group cohesion is reached. This important aim is expressed by words like *simunye* ("we are one," i.e., "unity is strength") (Bangura, 2005). The desire to agree within the context of ubuntu safeguards the rights and opinions of individuals to enforce group solidarity. In essence, ubuntu requires an authentic respect for individual rights, and an honest appreciation of differences (Bangura, 2005).

Spaulding once mentioned that

the problem of contact is the chief problem of human intercourse. Personal contact and business contact, if not properly directed and if not based on mutual goodwill and intelligence derived from a commonsense education, will develop personal conflict and business conflict instead of personal cooperation and business cooperation.

Spaulding's view was aligned with Bangura's conceptualization of ubuntu, and it demonstrated the importance of achieving some form of consensus.

To achieve a cooperative advantage, the consensus tenet of Ubuntu requires a respect for individual's rights and cultural values, and an authentic appreciation of differences among various cultures (Nafukho et al., 2011). People also tend to respect managers and leaders who seek the opinions of employees before major

decisions are made (Nafukho et al., 2011). The facilitation of employee voice as well as voice from other important stakeholders such as community members to aid in consensus building influence increased cooperation, improved decision-making, and higher performance.

In the United States, Black Americans continued African practices after the Civil War and cooperated economically to survive. The recently freed African Americans pooled their resources to purchase land to farm and make a living (Du Bois, 1907; Gordon Nembhard, 2014a, 2014b; Jones, 1985). Early African American cooperative economic and entrepreneurial activities took various forms: collective farming, buying clubs, joint-stock ownership, mutual aid societies, fraternal organizations, mutual insurance organizations (Gordon Nembhard, 2014a, 2014b). Interestingly, one of the key individuals in this book, Charles Clinton (C. C.) Spaulding, The Father of African American Management, also known as Mr Cooperation, served as the manager of a Black cooperative grocery store before he started his career with the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance, which was established out of the mutual-aid movement (a form of cooperative society) (Gordon Nembhard, 2014a, 2014b; Weare, 1973).

African American business pioneers like C. C. Spaulding largely got their start in business due to their involvement in systems of Black economic cooperation. The African traditional systems of cooperation and philosophies (such as Ubuntu) permeated its way into more “modern” forms of businesses within the United States, and the rest of the Americas, and other Black business pioneers such as Alonzo Herndon and Maggie Lena Walker (first Black female bank president to charter a bank in the United States) were successful because of it.

The famed African American scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois (1907), in one of his seminal works entitled “Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans” even discussed Africa and its influence:

We have, therefore, first to ask ourselves in this study, how far are there traces in Africa of economic life and economic cooperation among Negroes? Du Bois felt that “cooperation” was a primary aspect of African tribal life (DeMarco, 1974). Du Bois (1909) stated that in Africa “no individual can be poorer than the tribe.” He also contended that during American slavery, there were traditional customs that were retained from Africa that kept African Americans from the economic competition that were antithetical to cooperation (Du Bois, 1909; DeMarco, 1974). Du Bois (1907) also referenced African economic customs that survived in the West Indies during the times of slavery as evidenced in the marketplace where the enslaved bartered their provisions.

Marshall (1968) stated that informal cooperatives made their appearance immediately after emancipation in Jamaica, and groups of the formerly enslaved pooled their resources to purchase land and to build churches and schools. Later, more formal organizations came such as the Friendly and Benefit Societies, the Jamaica Agricultural Society, and the People’s Cooperative Loan Bank of Jamaica (Marshall, 1968). Those banks, which were first established in 1905, represented a considerable initiative in the area of self-help (Marshall, 1968). The importance of those banks in rendering vital financial assistance to people of African descent, particularly in times of natural disaster, can be judged from

the fact that by 1949, 119 branches of the bank with 72,700 members had been established, and the bank had made advances and loans of nearly £2 million (Marshall, 1968).

Beneficial and burial societies also appeared in the times of slavery in the United States. According to Du Bois (1907),

the history of the Negro insurance extends far beyond the days of his freedom in this country. While there are no recorded data available, yet from reliable sources we learn that more than seventy-five years ago there existed in every city of any size in Virginia organizations of Negroes having as their object the caring for the sick and the burying of the dead.

It should be noted that it was unlawful (and dangerous) for African Americans to congregate in those times. However, they still found a way to take care of each other.

According to DeMarco (1974), Du Bois presented Black economic cooperation as an effective and practical solution to the problems facing the African American community such as poverty and crime. Du Bois' plan for solving the problems facing African Americans required a spirit of cooperation, and the presence of an economic base within the Black community. He observed a cooperative spirit permeating Black history, and he found that African Americans already had a partly established group economy, partially due to segregation. Therefore, he proposed economic cooperation as a method that would take advantage of the strengths of the Black community (DeMarco, 1974).

African American Management has its roots in traditional systems of cooperation, which garnered support in Black churches and mutual aid societies. African American management thought embraced the philosophy of cooperation to accomplish the goals of the organization to the benefit of the employees, customers, and the community. Black leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were both proponents of economic cooperation. Even though they were seen as rivals, they both cared deeply about the economic welfare of African Americans and strived to lay the foundation that ensured the recently freed African Americans were equipped for the future.

Booker T. Washington operationalized W. E. B. Du Bois' philosophy of cooperation when he founded the National Negro Business League (NNBL) in 1900, and its first meeting was held in Boston, Massachusetts. According to Washington (1907), the NNBL was "formed for the purpose of bringing our businessmen together for mutual help and encouragement." A successful example of Black economic cooperation in the early 20th century was the creation of the Colored Merchants Association (CMA). The CMA was founded by the NNBL in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1927, under the leadership of Albon Holsey, NNBL secretary. It was an association of independent grocers organized into a buying and advertising cooperative. The creation of the CMA was a way to support independent Black grocery stores with mutual support in a difficult market

(Gordon Nembhard, 2014a, 2014b; Walker, 1998). However, due to the Great Depression, the venture failed.

African American involvement in cooperatives declined after World War II. According to Walker (1998), “while cooperatives provided economic advantages to their members, Blacks, as loyal Americans, were determined to be part of the capitalistic free-enterprise system, pursuing individual avenues to wealth, even if it was to their disadvantage.” Dr Claud Anderson, a prominent author and advocate for Black economic self-sufficiency, made the point that African Americans’ inability to practice group economics in a capitalistic democracy has hindered Blacks in America (Anderson, 1994). Unfortunately, many of the African centered traditional systems of cooperation are now largely forgotten. However, it can possibly play a vital role in helping African Americans and others from the African diaspora achieve managerial and entrepreneurial success in contemporary times.

This book is not a comprehensive one pertaining to African American Management History as many stories are not included. Nevertheless, it does provide insights on some of the major pioneers who contributed significantly to the Black business landscape in the United States, and it provides a snapshot of the rich legacy that should be celebrated and emulated. The authors will attempt to show how these noteworthy pioneers achieved a cooperative advantage for the organizations that they lead. The authors define *cooperative advantage* as the positive benefits that an organization possesses and accrues due to its people-centered approach to development and sustainability. This encompasses engendering a spirit of care and community, dialogue, and consensus-building for the benefit of the employees, customers, community, and the entire value chain. Gaining a cooperative advantage means embracing African traditions of cooperation to develop a meaningful relationship with all stakeholders, and in this book, you will observe how Charles Clinton Spaulding, Maggie Lena Walker, John Merrick, and others lead their organizations while embracing this philosophy.

There are a few other conceptualizations of cooperative advantage by other authors that are also worth reading (Strand & Freeman, 2015; Zoogah, 2012).

Chapter 1, “The Case for African American Management History,” makes an argument for teaching African American Management History. It makes the case that Black entrepreneurs tend to have less success than their white counterparts do, probably because Black communities more frequently lack a framework to create successful entrepreneurial role models, and the lack of African American traditions in business knowledge hinders intergenerational transference in business ownership. The chapter also states that this may be one of the reasons why African American Management History needs to be integrated into the business curriculum at tertiary institutions, whether they are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), to provide examples of successful Black business pioneers to motivate and increase the entrepreneurial knowledge and self-efficacy of students from underestimated communities.

Chapter 2, “Cooperative Enterprises Matter: Historic Insights from W. E. B. Du Bois and William Matney,” makes an argument for teaching the cooperative