

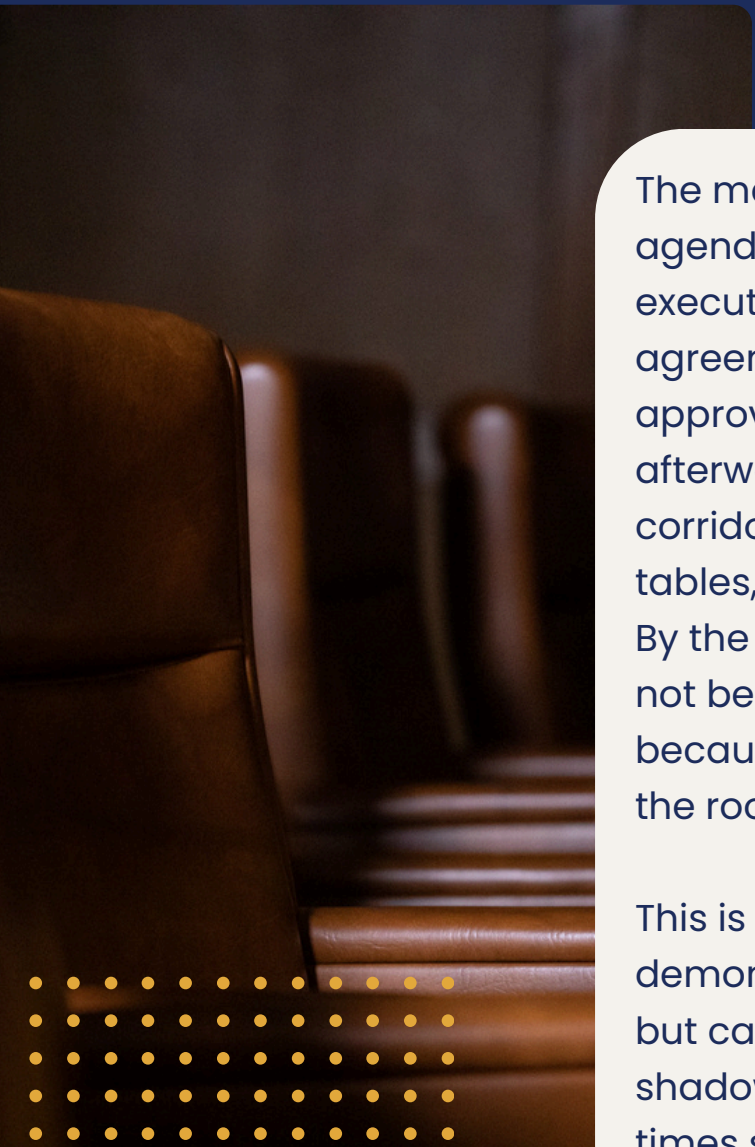


Depthwork® Zimbabwe White Paper

TOWARDS ENDURING LEADERSHIP

Insights from Zimbabwean Executives

Opening Story: The Meeting That Never Happened



The meeting began with polished agendas and nods of agreement. Every executive around the table nodded in agreement to the vision. The strategy was approved. But the real meeting happened afterwards, in the glances down the corridors, in whispered tones at the coffee tables, in guarded WhatsApp messages. By the next quarter, execution had stalled, not because the plan was wrong, but because the courage to speak the truth in the room had been absent.

This is Zimbabwe's executive culture: it demonstrates great brilliance at the table, but caution often pushes candour into the shadows. Habits formed in challenging times still echo in leadership spaces.

Executive Summary

Our diagnostic study (n = 120 executives across finance, multilateral, social enterprise, and corporate sectors) reveals a paradox: Zimbabwe's executives are strong as individuals but underperform as collectives.

Key findings:

70% said decisions are reinterpreted in corridors after meetings.

65% said harmony is prioritised over honesty.

60% observed decisions orbit around one dominant personality.

55% admitted their teams are emotionally fatigued.

Only **25%** described trust as deep and genuine.

These numbers reflect patterns found globally (McKinsey, Edelman, Brené Brown), but they are sharpened by Zimbabwe's complex operating environment, shaped by rapid change, evolving policies, and the daily realities of leading through uncertainty. The issues are real: fragile trust, corridor politics, and ignored burnout. But so are the assets: resilience, respect for authority, ingenuity in navigating risk, and a cultural instinct for Ubuntu. The invitation: to shift from survival leadership, polite, fatigued, fragmented, to Authentic Leadership: courageous, collective, anchored in dignity.

1.Smiles that Hide Silence

One of the clearest patterns that emerged from the diagnostic is that 65% of executives said harmony is prioritised over honesty. As one leader confessed, “We smile through tensions without addressing them.” This instinct reflects Zimbabwe’s cultural genius for preserving community, a survival strength that carried us through decades of volatility. But harmony without honesty quickly becomes paralysis. What if Zimbabwean leaders could pair Ubuntu’s gift for harmony with the courage of candour? The future of our institutions may depend on it.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #1: Harmony without honesty is paralysis.

2.The Corridor is Louder than the Boardroom

Another striking finding is that 70% of executives admitted decisions are reinterpreted in corridors after meetings, and 60% said one dominant personality often shapes outcomes. In the words of one respondent, “Most decisions orbit around one dominant personality. Others defer, even when they disagree.” This reveals Zimbabwean leaders’ adaptability and political intelligence, a refined ability to navigate power subtly and resist without open confrontation. Yet ingenuity hidden in whispers is ingenuity wasted. If the courage expressed in corridors was voiced at the table itself, the collective genius of Zimbabwe’s leaders would no longer be squandered.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #2: Corridor whispers waste collective genius.

3.Trust at the Surface

Only one in four executives (25%) described trust in their teams as “deep and genuine.” For most, trust was labelled “performative” or “political.” One candid remark captured it: “As one leader reflected, ‘Our trust is political — not deep.’ This captures a sentiment shared by several respondents, where trust is often shaped more by positional dynamics than by open candour. Zimbabwe’s Authentic Leaders must move beyond surface-level trust to cultivate relationships that hold both dignity and radical honesty.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #3: Survival silences; Authentic Leadership speaks.

4.The Hidden Cost of Fatigue

Burnout emerged as another silent but powerful theme: 55% of executives admitted emotional exhaustion, though few speak of it openly. As one put it, “People are tired, overwhelmed, and stretched, but we keep pushing as if nothing’s wrong.” This reveals Zimbabwe’s extraordinary resilience; few nations could endure so much and still carry on. But resilience without renewal corrodes leadership over time. Sustainable Authentic Leadership requires rhythms of rest and reflection, not endless endurance. As the Ndebele proverb teaches: Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, a person is a person through others. Leaders, too, need others to hold, renew, and restore them.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #4: Resilience without renewal becomes exhaustion.

5.Reading the Patterns Through Depthwork®

The Depthwork® lens helps us see these dynamics not as isolated problems but as patterns with roots. Many executives wear the Harmony Mask, avoiding conflict, or the Deference Mask, silencing dissent. Many teams find themselves caught in the “wound” stage of the Scar–Wound–Sovereign cycle, often operating from a place of guardedness and avoidance. Meanwhile, embracing Authentic Leadership, courageous, honest, and collaborative, remains a heartfelt aspiration to strive towards. Above the surface, teams appear aligned and professional; beneath it, mistrust and fatigue ripple. These are not failures but adaptive strategies shaped by Zimbabwe’s context. The challenge now is to transform them into strengths fit for a new era.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #5: What once protected us now holds us back.

6.Global Parallels, Local Truths

Zimbabwe is not alone in these struggles. McKinsey research confirms that psychological safety is the single strongest predictor of team performance. The Edelman Trust Barometer calls trust the currency of modern leadership. And Brené Brown reminds us: “You can have comfort or courage, but not both.” What is unique is Zimbabwe’s context, where survivalist habits sharpen these dynamics. In this sense, Zimbabwe is not behind but ahead, a microcosm of global leadership wounds. If we can model courageous leadership in contexts of uncertainty, we may yet become pioneers for the continent and beyond.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #6: Our struggles are universal, but our response can set the pace for the continent.

7.The Cost of Hidden Friction

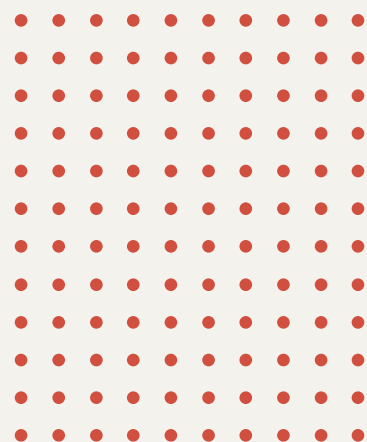
When two-thirds of executives (65–70%) describe their teams in terms of harmony over honesty, corridor politics, and fragile trust, the costs are real. Strategic drift sets in, as plans announced with conviction unravel in execution. Corridor resistance delays progress, slowing down institutions in critical moments. Younger voices disengage, draining talent. Innovation shrinks under the weight of cultural fatigue. In contexts like Zimbabwe, this is not abstract; it is livelihoods lost, competitiveness eroded, and national potential constrained.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #7: Hidden friction costs us speed, trust, and talent.

8.The Reset Zimbabwe Needs

Executives themselves put it best: “We are overdue for a leadership reset.” Depthwork® offers a Zimbabwean-rooted framework to meet this moment. Leadership Reset Retreats provide safe spaces to name elephants, rebuild trust, and realign around strategy. The Reveal Cycle™ and Mask Matrix™ help teams unmask adaptive behaviours that no longer serve them. The Power Pulse Check™ gives leaders real-time feedback on trust and candour. And Ubuntu Anchors ensure leadership renewal is rooted in dignity, solidarity, and accountability. This is not about importing fads. It is about remembering what Zimbabwe already knows: leadership is never solitary, it is collective, or it is nothing at all.

Zimbabwean Leadership Truth #8: Leadership is never solitary; it is collective, or it is nothing at all.



The First 100 Days:

Practical Entry Points for Renewal

Change does not begin with grand strategies; it begins with consistent acts of courage. In the next 100 days, Zimbabwe's executives may find it useful to experiment with simple but powerful practices that reset culture in tangible ways:

- Name one elephant in the boardroom, kindly, directly, without blame. Truth spoken with respect often marks the beginning of renewal.
- Move conversations from corridors into the room. When dissent exists, let it be voiced where decisions are made.
- Check for fatigue. A simple question, "What is one thing we can stop doing to ease the load?" can release hidden pressure and restore energy.
- Strengthen accountability rituals. Ensure every major decision carries a clear follow-up. Most execution gaps come not from weak ideas, but from weak ownership.
- Anchor in Ubuntu. Begin meetings with a reflection not only on tasks, but on trust, a reminder that we lead not in isolation, but as a collective.

Small shifts, consistently practised, can create cultural momentum. Renewal does not require permission; it begins wherever leaders choose to act with courage.

A Call to Courage: From Survival to Authentic Leadership

Zimbabwe's leaders have already proven we can survive storms that would have broken others. But survival has its ceiling.

- Survival silences. Authentic leadership speaks.
- Survival exhausts. Authentic leadership renews.
- Survival fragments. Authentic leadership unites.

As one executive reflected, "Zimbabwe does not lack intelligence. What we lack is the courage to face each other honestly and still remain together." The question is not whether we have the brilliance; we do. The question is whether we will choose the courage to move from survival into authentic, courageous, Ubuntu-rooted leadership.

Tomorrow morning, when the boardroom doors close, will we smile and stay silent, or will we dare to speak, to trust, to lead differently? The future of our institutions, and perhaps our nation, depends on how we answer that question, together.



About This Paper

This white paper was authored by Vongai Nyahunzvi, Founder of Equinexus Partners, under the Depthwork® Zimbabwe initiative. It draws on diagnostic data from executives across multiple sectors (n = 120), integrates global leadership research, and is grounded in Zimbabwean cultural wisdom.

The intent of this paper is not self-promotion, but provocation: to hold up a mirror, extend an invitation, and issue a mandate for the transformation of executive culture in Zimbabwe. Its purpose is to spark dialogue and action, calling leaders to move beyond survival into authentic, courageous, and Ubuntu-rooted leadership.