



**LEADING THE WAY FROM POVERTY  
TO PROSPERITY IN LESOTHO  
The Case of Kali Charles Thaanye**  
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A study of bridging leadership in the Lesotho produced in  
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## Background

Born in 1955 in the small village of Mahlanyeng in the hills near Maseru, the capital of the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho, Kali Charles Thaanyane inherited poverty and uncertainty. But with this inauspicious start came a strong sense of family, responsibility and purpose. Despite living below the poverty line the family rejoiced in the birth of their first child, a strong son, Kali Charles, and believed very firmly that God would take care of him. Five children followed, making four boys and two girls, each a blessing in the eyes of the parents, but each also an extra burden on a poor family in this small, landlocked mountain kingdom.

Lesotho has a proud tradition of independence, and is one of few African countries never colonised by the West. It was only a protectorate under the British but was never a colony. Lesotho's mountainous terrain made it a challenge for even the most determined prospective coloniser. Surrounded on all sides by mountains bordering South Africa, Lesotho ultimately accepted the protection of Britain, and was then known as Basotholand. The Basotho people carved out a difficult existence from this rugged land where sturdy mountain ponies were often the only means of transport.

When Kali Charles was a young boy the 'winds of change' were sweeping across Africa. The country was renamed Lesotho and relinquished the Protection of Britain in 1966. The birth pangs of the new Lesotho, a small landlocked country were extremely difficult, characterised by internal political conflicts as well as conflict with the Apartheid regime. The early days of independence were marked by party political tumult resulting from the ongoing difficulties with harmonising democratic processes and structures with the very strong traditional society represented by the King. On the other hand it came into conflict with the Apartheid regime with whom its economy was intertwined. Lesotho provided haven for many ANC activists in exile from the 1950's to the late 1980's, and as a result was subject to some violent repercussions affected by South Africa's clandestine forces. The king has few constitutional powers, but remains extremely influential both as an embodiment of traditional culture and as a player in the complex politics of the country.

Although most of the Basotho people are Christian, traditional customs, rites and beliefs help to support, explain and give purpose to their hard and basic lives as subsistence farmers. Spectacular summer thunderstorms and snow-covered peaks in winter provide it with its most important natural resource, water. Soil erosion is a major problem; uninformed communal grazing, farming and road-making practises have exacerbated the natural tendency of the soil to be arid and poor. Although most homesteads or communities have private or communal gardens towards subsistence, much of Lesotho's food is imported. The relatively small manufacturing sector, the sale of water, minerals (diamonds) and tourism are responsible for most of Lesotho's export earnings. Aside from small local shops, there is

little economy or industry happening outside of the small town centres and Maseru. Although the city and towns do have services, most of the rural areas have little, and roads are often poor. When it rains, roads can become impassable. Young boys grow up as herd boys, often remaining in the mountains with herds for weeks, even in freezing winter conditions. Many young girls and women still have to wake before sunrise to walk long distances to fetch heavy loads of water or wood.

## **Bridging the poverty divide through education and business**

By 1966 Kali's father had died, and according to tradition and custom this made the primary school boy the 'man of the family', a role he never shirked. His mother, Mary, was a domestic worker at the National University of Lesotho in the town of Roma, bringing in what little she could to feed and educate her large fatherless family. Mary Thaanyane was determined that they would have opportunities she and her husband had never had. Mary believed in her children, and, particularly in Kali who shared the burden of the family with her from an early age. Kali developed a very strong relationship with his mother; she depended on him more, and allowed him to make decisions and valued his input on how the household should be run. During the hardest times she was supportive and positive-minded, able to raise laughs of happiness in the face of deprivation. Kali respected his mother, not just as his mother, but as a woman who was tough, dedicated and fair-minded. His relationship with her laid the foundation for his respectful relationships throughout his life with all other women; not only his wife and his mother. Although they were poor, they had fun, happiness and enlightenment in their home, and warm love, support and encouragement from their mother. The children attended local schools, and each had their share of the physically tiresome daily chores like collecting water or wood, or washing clothes and blankets, or combing the mountain for edible plants to add to their meals.

In the late 1960's Kali and his family were featured in several international magazines, representing the poverty of Africa; a small and dusty but clean home, old and worn out clothes and utensils, make-shift furnishings; a family of undernourished, thin children with big eyes and big smiles. Kali was old enough to be affected by this incident. He was proud and did not intend to allow himself nor his family defined by material poverty. He was determined that he and his family and many other Africans would rise above the cycle of poverty endemic to Africa. He was always aware that in the midst of this material poverty, he, his family and his community did not suffer from emotional or intellectual poverty. He refused to let material poverty limit his or anyone else's vision of the future. This was one of his strongest motivating forces. The context he grew up in, his family and his country in a changing world, contributed to shaping Kali Charles Thaanyane into the remarkable man he is today.

Kali Thaanyane is a passionate man. He hates violence, despair, selfishness and unfairness, and he challenges poverty. He hates the political and other confrontations that prevent progress. He especially despises the negative perceptions he believes that Africans hold of themselves and is aware that the ways of the world have fostered this thinking. But he argues, *“Why must we fight one another?”* He continues, *“Surely we have more in common than we have differences? Surely we want the same things for our people, our country, our continent?”* The starting point for him in life was his determination to make a difference. *“I was never sorry for myself,”* he says. *“God created me with a purpose and I realized early that this was not only to help my own family but also to work for the world and all the people who live on it.”*

Making his dream a reality began with education. Kali won a government bursary by passing his primary education with distinction in 1971. In 1976 he passed his matriculation exam and was eligible to enter university. But he decided to fulfil his family obligations, working and studying part-time so that he could make a contribution to the education of his siblings. That was when he did his stint on the mines in South Africa. It was not one of his great successes, but he did provide money for the household, which made him feel good. This experience gave him an opportunity to experience Apartheid first hand while providing hard working experience. Although Kali was not politically active he was aware. As he came from Lesotho which did not practice legal apartheid at least, he could sympathise with the South Africans, but his concern was with Lesotho. Eventually his outspoken demand for equality led to his dismissal. As Kali puts it, *“The reason why I was fired is that I was the only black man working shifts with two white men. I demanded equal opportunities for equal responsibilities. To the mine authorities, that made me a rebel and they terminated my contract.”*

But this was just a detour. Kali was determined to make something of himself and he believed the way to do that was through education. While working at various jobs, he continued studying by correspondence, usually business-related disciplines. Amongst other jobs he did; construction work on roads and buildings; car-washing; deliveries; clerical work, stock-taking; shelf-packing. He also dabbled in entrepreneurial activities such as buying groceries and other items for re-sale. By 1984 he had a diploma in Marketing Management, and a driver’s license. By the time of the writing of this case study he has obtained several additional marketing and business qualifications. Perhaps even more important to him, is that one of his younger brothers, who Kali supported, has obtained a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of Lesotho.

Kali has become a business leader of note in the Kingdom of Lesotho. His small buying and selling operation first expanded into a food-based trading enterprise called Letsema. Then he diversified through Letsema Investment Holdings which now owns a mini-market in Maseru, a restaurant that is set to become a fast food franchising outlet, a training and management consultancy, and a fashion design school where women are encouraged to take control of their own lives by acquiring a marketable skill. Since 1993, he has owned a business school that offers

externally accredited marketing courses, computer skills and business studies. Each year, over 1000 students pass through this college. Some use it as a bridge for further education inside and outside of Lesotho, others start their own enterprises. Kali tells how he was determined not to let the school fail – too many people needed it to succeed. He said,

*“We started with one room that served as an office during the day and a classroom in the evening. We filled the classroom with the night watchmen who made it look like there were more students. Each time a new student enrolled, one night watchman left. This happened for six months when we finally had enough students and more offices and a classroom.”*

Many graduates of his business school have also gone on to hold high positions in corporations. It is Kali’s intention to break the back of poverty not only for himself and his family but for many more. He will not rest until this dream has been realized. Kali also has the controlling share in a holding company that deals in micro-finance and is chairman of a company based in Malawi that offers business training and consultancy services in Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Zambia. *“This company is structured to know no borders, no color divide and no gender divide”*, he says proudly.

Letsema Investment Holdings has a commitment to develop its employees reflecting Kali’s concerns about developing Lesotho and its people. Employees are embraced as partners and given shares in subsidiary companies in which they work so that they are both employees and shareholders. They are work shopped and informed in all aspects of the demands of running a productive, efficient and sustainable business. The morale of staff is high and their sense of responsibility, ownership and commitment is very strong. This principle of giving workers shares has been developed into the idea of opening a top class restaurant on the mine. The idea is to give miners the opportunity to buy shares in the restaurant cutting across divisions of race and ethnicity. Kali admits to indulging in a bit of nostalgia, remembering his own brief days on the mine.

## **What was the challenge?**

The challenge that confronted Kali was the challenge that confronted Lesotho: how get out from under the poverty cycle and use the resources he knew people had, to produce wealth that benefited the many and not just a few. For Kali with his large family it went further. How to support others without making them dependent on him? How to build a sense of self-esteem in others, to make them respect themselves. How to persuade them to take responsibility for their economic situation and to develop a mindset that equates success, not failure, with being African? He believes that failure is a temporary state of affairs, a learning process that leads to the next success. If you ask him now, he will tell you that he does not remember any failures in his life. His way of addressing problems he confronted was to begin with himself, with his dreams, his belief in himself. He insists that: *“Whatever you vividly imagine, laboriously work upon, undoubtedly believe in, will ultimately come to effect.”*

## Family and gender

Kali's achievements in education and business are the result of a man who does not sit and wait for things to happen. He praises his parents, especially his mother, for imbuing this attitude towards life in him. He has vast energy and is happiest when doing things. He can get impatient with those who, he thinks, take too long to act. His wife is the one most likely to hear his frustration expressed. For him the challenge is clear – to build a better life for all the people of Africa. *“Let's get on with it”* he says. But he concurs with his wife's scolding, “You must give people a chance. You are racing ahead. People like to be sure before they act.”

Kali's commitment to gender equality is notable in a traditional African society. He does not only pay lip-service to it. His wife, the mother of his four children, is a strong woman who, in her own right, is managing director of several of their business enterprises. She is a role model for young Basotho women. If confronted by a traditionalist viewpoint that suggests his wife is living more like a man than a woman, he gently corrects them by saying that his wife is an excellent Basotho woman who fulfils not only her traditional, wifely, and motherly roles, but also plays a role in the country's economy, improving the lives and lifestyles of many other people. He openly and proudly admits that if it were not for her, he would not have been able to do all the things he has been doing, and that both his family life and his businesses would not have been as successful. She makes it possible for Kali to carry out his many activities outside of his businesses. Their relationship is a partnership in family, life and business, contributing to Lesotho's and Africa's development. It is a relationship based on mutual respect and a similar worldview.

## Business service leadership

Kali is a member of the internationally recognised Southern African Institute of Marketing Management (IMM), a non-profit professional organisation. IMM promotes excellence and professionalism in the practice of marketing and provides and encourages education and training in all aspects of marketing. IMM provides a professional service to individuals and organisations engaged in marketing; and serves southern Africa by encouraging the business community to adhere to a code of marketing ethics. As a motivational speaker for IMM, he promotes the importance of marketing in a free enterprise economy.

Kali is secretary of the Lesotho Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and works hard to realise the aim of this organisation to build a strong business sector in Lesotho that involves and includes the ordinary people of Lesotho. A phrase one often hears from Kali is, *“changing people's mindsets – that is what we need to do.”* His role in the Chamber has often been a mediating one, with both employers and employees looking to him to help resolve conflicts. Some of the high profile mediations and negotiations in which he has been involved include:

- ◆ Mediation between the Lesotho banks and their employees in 1993;
- ◆ Mediation between the Lesotho Telecommunications Corporation and striking employees in 1995;
- ◆ Negotiating the purchase of government enterprises by the private sector;
- ◆ Negotiating with the Lesotho government for the Basotho people to be included in mainstream economy through fairer tender processes;
- ◆ Negotiating for micro-finance institutions to be recognised as players in the Lesotho economy.

## Strategy

Kali's strategy is based on the view that all development starts with the individual; but that the individual cannot do it alone or in a vacuum. He is positive, disciplined, hardworking, pro-active yet non-confrontational in his style, and sets a high standard of expectations. He believes knowledge and information, combined with hard work, patience and focus, will always produce positive results. He believes in introspection for individuals and collective introspection for organisations and promotes a pro-active optimistic approach. Challenges, problems, disputes will not go away by themselves. They must be faced, and they must be tackled from all sides. He is convinced that even if a matter is personal, it is better to share it with others who one trusts. Their support and compassion, and their points of view and insights, can help provide greater perspective. He suggests that short-term and long-term goals must be identified and implemented. Integrity, commitment and discipline must be applied to the process and to the solutions arrived at. No matter how hard this may seem at the time, if the solution was arrived at through a proper process, and duly implemented and adhered to, the intended end-result will unfold successfully, Kali sincerely believes.

Kali fully understands compromise, not as giving in or giving up, but as being realistic and as choosing the best solution possible, even if just for the short-term. He believes that negative things happen to remind one that one must always seek knowledge and information and new ways of doing things. Negative things, or difficulties cause one to re-think positions, to change one's attitude and they are therefore not really negatives, but positives. Social, political, economic and technological issues are closely inter-twined and subject to forces that demand change and adaptability faster than human personalities, patterns or habits may traditionally be accustomed to. He encourages change and compromise through informed negotiation that must be democratically balanced in their approach, process and end-results. All parties concerned must participate; all are responsible; all have a voice; all must give and all must get, no matter how small each one's contribution or gain is. If you don't have the knowledge or skill, call on those who do, and build respectful relationships with them, listening and learning; you may need to call on them again. Gauge the characters you are

dealing with, and identify the challenge at hand; some need to be taken to dinner for informal and more private discussions before and during the group process; some need to be gently reminded that force-of-character or position does not necessarily mean he/she has the best viewpoint, opinion or suggestions; some quiet ones need to have their input drawn out of them and affirmed before they contribute more securely. Rules and regulations, and codes of conduct must be practical, achievable, clarified, made known, and abided with by everyone. Every meeting must have a purpose and a positive end. Time must be organized. Every one can make a positive difference, not only to his/her own circumstance, but also to those of the family, organisation and nation of which he/she is a part. He applies this strategy automatically and with diplomacy; developed and practised in his home and family life since he was a young boy. It is for these skills, and his reputation as a successful Lesotho businessman and leader, that Kali has been invited into high-powered mediations in businesses or state organs. Regarding these, he humbly suggests that success relies as much on the willingness and calibre of disputing or negotiating partners, as it does on the skills of the mediator.

## **Community service leadership**

His involvement in his community extends way beyond his business involvements. Well-known for his capacity to be impartial, fair, principled and democratic in his nature and lifestyle, Kali successfully tendered for and was assigned to train the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) staff throughout Lesotho. He focused on building teams that redefined their role from instructing the electorate to serving the electorate. Today he is appointed as a mediator for the IEC in Lesotho.

Considering the southern African context in which Kali grew up and lives, it is noticeable that he never describes and seldom limits people by their race, religion or political affiliation. People are people, and they must prove themselves peculiar in some way before he takes note of these characteristics as being of any great significance. His approach says something about the Basotho people and about Lesotho's unique political history. Despite being small, landlocked, poor, pressured and even destabilised by events in South Africa, Lesotho has never experienced extremes of oppression and suppression. Pro-democratic, the Basotho people and Lesotho have always denied and refused apartheid policies that discoloured political, social and economic factors in southern Africa for decades.

Kali sees beyond his community and the borders of Lesotho. He believes in the African Renaissance and participates in and contributes to pan-African development affairs. This is in line with his lifelong motivation to reframe the African attitude and perception from one of poverty to one of plenty. His own institutions are members of broad-based African initiatives like the Private Colleges Association of Southern Africa, and a southern African business network in which he plays an active role. *"Things we cannot do alone, we can do together"* is his call to others when he persuades them to join and work actively in these networks. He is fascinated by the diversity of people, across race, gender, levels of wealth, age and



nationality, and believes that it is in this diversity, united in the pursuit of common goals, that the success of the African Renaissance will lay.

## **Role models**

Two role models that Kali cites, aside from his parents and his wife, are Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. He admires King's determination to liberate African Americans from domination by other races, for his worldview which transcended cultural divides; for his courage in risking his life for something he believed in, and for his compassion and caring. He admires Mandela for his lack of bitterness after so much suffering, his determination to build and not destroy, his ability to forgive, his worldview which, like King's, transcends differences to find commonality, and above all his ability to stick to his principles and his commitment to being himself at all costs. These heroes embody his vision for his own people: a people who are independent, self-reliant and that have integrity and the capacity to build a better future for themselves and their children.

If one asks people in Lesotho, both attached to Kali's varied enterprises or not, they will tell you that Kali is one of their role models. They will tell you that he is a great leader who has brought and helped make important changes in Lesotho, and in the lives of many people. They will tell you that he interacts with other great leaders in business and governments across southern Africa and the world. As one person put it, *"He is proof that one can come from nowhere and nothing, and become someone from somewhere"*.

## **Critical Incident**

Kali recalls how, when he first started trading tinned goods, he wanted to be sure of his customer base, and so he did research in the village communities between Maseru and Roma, eventually deciding which products would be the best for him to start with (tinned fish and jam; small packets of sugar; body and clothes soaps). He then went from supplier to supplier to find the best price for these goods. He then returned to the trader who had offered him a best price with the best attitude and cajoled him into giving him an even better price so that Kali could cover transport costs back to the village communities. He showed his list of customers in all the villages, convincing the supplier that these customers were guaranteed and that he would be returning daily for stocks. He showed the trader his 'apron' that his mother had made for him and onto which he had painted the words 'Letsema' (we work together). The supplier was impressed, not only giving him a better price, but also a small wheeled trolley that would make transporting the goods through the village easier.

Meanwhile, Kali also negotiated with a lecturer at the University of Lesotho who travelled from Maseru to Roma every day for work to transport Kali and his goods for free every day

from Maseru to a village on the way to Roma. To Kali, all this meant was that he had to get up extra early to do other chores before going to Maseru for an early start. His small selling operation established his reputation in the region. Through his visits to the many customers in the many villages people began to know of him. They began to ask him to supply other goods, and to tell him of other customers who wanted to meet him and buy from him. It was not long before he had to carry more goods than he could manage alone; his solution to this was threefold:

- (a) From a local scrap yard he secured old wheels from broken trolleys, tricycles and lawnmowers, and pieces of wood and wire, negotiating them as a giveaway.
- (b) In each village in which he was selling, he made a deal with a young reasonably educated person to help him. The young person's contribution and commitment had to be demonstrated by making up a trolley, using the pieces Kali supplied; and by growing the customer-base.
- (c) The person would then meet him at the drop-off point, they would load the trolley and then Kali would leave them to sell the goods in the village, getting an agreed share of the proceeds.

In hindsight, Kali concedes that one or two distasteful incidents occurred, and indicates that these were really a result of his lack of experience at the time, especially in gauging the character of people. He once had to fire a helper because he had used many of the goods for a private party instead of selling them to customers who were left waiting, and then suggested he pay the amount owed to Kali by working it off slowly over the following few months. Not only was the helper unconcerned that the business now had unhappy customers who may go elsewhere, but he was unconcerned as to how Kali would lose out. He said it was very awkward, but that he kept reminding himself that he was not giving in to poverty, and no other person's actions would make him poor either.

Later he took the deal further, organising free storage for the goods in each village, often in the homes of the person helping him to sell. This meant he could deliver more goods at a time, and they could be sold over the week. In his own village, his siblings helped him, and they gained their fair proceeds from this too, thus helping them to contribute to the family needs. He opened a bank account, learned about banking affairs that affected him, and developed relations with banking advisors. In time, he took many of his helpers to the bank and got them to open bank accounts and to develop networks. He realised that all this went towards his good relations with the bank, because they were supportive when about a year later, he asked for his first loan to help him pay for driver's lessons, license and a second-hand vehicle for himself.

Although Kali was never asked by the lecturer reimburse him for the invaluable assistance with transport he had provided to Kali, Kali would periodically make a gift of some goods to the lecturer, as a gesture of thanks. He also invited the lecturer to their home for dinner on

occasions. Kali admits that this was not always just to say thank you, but also to engage in more intellectual discussions. The lecturer and his family were guests at his wedding, as was the trader who gave him a helpful start and most of the village-helpers at that time.

In time, when he established his own mini-market in Maseru, he retained links with many of these helpers and helped them grow from 'trolley-suppliers and storage depots' to small local trading stores, with Kali supplying them. He widened his supply network to reach into many more villages across Lesotho. As a gesture of goodwill and a symbol of potential growth; he provides his rural trading customers with a small trolley. Today, he and the helpful trader actually do some bulk-buys together; their combined buying power and resources getting them even better prices/rates.

### **Study questions:**

1. Is Kali Charles Thaanyane the kind of leader Africa needs? If you think he is, why?
2. How would you describe Kali's leadership style? Does he exercise "bridging" leadership?
3. What has made him this kind of leader?
4. If you consider his own words, and the words of others about him, what does this case tell you about his qualities as a leader, and as a bridging leader?
5. If you consider the critical incident, does this demonstrate bridging leadership, or merely entrepreneurship? How does leadership differ from entrepreneurship?

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