

Lead Us Today:

Bringing our best selves in service of OUR common good

Dalumuzi H. Mhlanga
University of Oxford

When I was seventeen, I established an “Inspiration Club” in my high school, Mzingwane, in Zimbabwe. This would be the first of a number of initiatives I started, which met serious needs in the communities that I was part of. At the time of establishing this club in 2006, Zimbabwe’s economy was on a steep decline, with an inflation rate in the order of thousands percent and an unemployment rate of over 80%. Many of my high school peers began to question the long-term value of working hard in school in the context of an economy that did not guarantee significant returns to studiousness. Moreover, we experienced hardship all around us – our parents struggled to feed and clothe our families well, neither did we have the best learning resources in our schools. However, I felt it was important for the Inspiration Club to bring together young people and provide a space for them to envision their long-term contributions to Zimbabwe’s advancement in spite of and beyond the difficult circumstances we were in.

Today, many members of that club are studying in some of the leading universities all over the world and building their capacity to contribute as leaders in the various realms of Zimbabwean society. Since this first experience of building a school club which has lasted for seven years and is still going strong, I have worked hard to build young people’s confidence and skills that enable them to impact their communities in positive ways.

After establishing other initiatives such as the Careers Support Initiative at Waterford Kamhlaba, my high school in Swaziland, and working with a group of students with a deep commitment to developing young people’s leadership potential at the Leadership Institute at Harvard College in the USA, I founded a non-profit organization in Zimbabwe, Lead Us Today (LUT). LUT provides high school students in the country with rigorous training on leadership and entrepreneurship. Through this training, we build students’ capacity to identify opportunities

for social innovation and enable them to mobilize their communities to address shared challenges.

The relevance and importance of our work stems from the grim reality that in Zimbabwe, only 4% of students, writing the high school final examinations (Ordinary Level) in any year eventually secure a job with decent income in the formal economy given the education system's design and the startling 70% unemployment rate. Unfortunately, the rigid school curriculum does not provide the 96% of students, who eventually gain income through informal economic activity, with skills that allow them to thrive in that sector. Essentially, students in Zimbabwe need a relevant curriculum that broadens their career options and equips them with skills that enhance business entrepreneurship and social innovations. Lead Us Today's programming provides learning experiences that close the gap between the current and ideal skill sets and mindsets needed by the young people in Zimbabwe to thrive in the country's difficult economy and simultaneously alleviate its challenges.

Driven by a deep commitment to meet this stark need, Lead Us Today has developed one of the most innovative and impact-oriented youth leadership and entrepreneurship development programs in Zimbabwe. We deliver a program structured around the academic year, which focuses on enabling students to make tangible impact in their communities. In the first half of the year, students meet with our facilitators for training sessions every week for two hours. Building from that training, students identify, design and implement an innovative and financially sustainable community development project. In the past, students have helped unemployed young people create a catering business in their high school, initiated a community recycling project and established a free community night school for adult education.

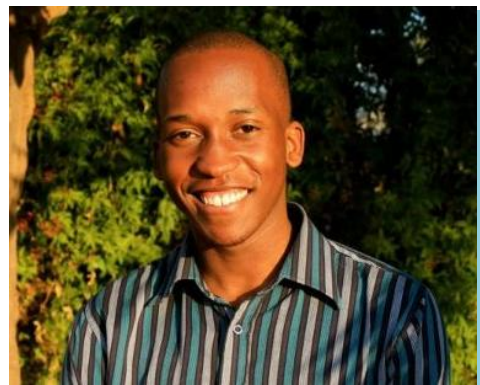
To date, we have provided world-class leadership and entrepreneurship training to nearly 1,500 students attending 20 schools in three out of Zimbabwe's ten provinces. The schools that we have partnered with for our program represent a diversity of schools catering for students from high and low-income families, urban and rural settings, able-bodied and disabled students.

In thinking about our work in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, I believe that our work at Lead Us Today is contributing to meeting their milestones and also innovating beyond them. In particular, we recognize that some of our country's challenges emanate from a dearth in sound leadership. Often, people think of leadership only in the political sense yet we believe that it is important to think beyond who currently runs government or who should run it. Instead, we believe that it is important to instigate deep shifts in people's values and ensure that initiative, innovation and integrity is engrained in citizens' DNA. Because of this focus, we are building a whole generation of engaged and socially responsible citizens at all levels of society and in as many spheres, who are always thinking about how they can take initiative and use local resources to address local challenges in innovative and ethical ways. My organization has already started to work towards this goal.

I am only 24 and, in the coming decades, I look forward to living my passion of creating opportunities for others to bring their best selves in service of OUR common good.

Profile:

Dalumuzi Mhlanga is the Founder & Chief Executive Officer of Lead Us Today (www.leadustoday.org), a nonprofit organization that mobilizes Zimbabwean youth to be socially responsible citizens who directly address pressing community needs through its consolidated package of leadership training, community service and internship programs. Since its founding in May 2010, Lead Us Today has trained nearly 1,500 students who have designed and implemented dozens of community development projects including a community catering business, recycling programs and a night school for drop outs.



Dalumuzi Mhlanga trains the youth addressing following four cornerstones for successful implementation of the Lead Us Today program:

1. **Building a strong team, which weathers the storms:** While Dalumuzi is “the face” of Lead Us Today, there is a very strong and stable team that has worked very hard to ensuring that the organization delivers great results. Dalumuzi share’s his lessons on how to build, maintain and strengthen a results-oriented team that is committed to a mission.
2. **Developing and refining your idea for social change:** Over the last three years, Lead Us Today has grown in tremendous ways – its model has been revised several times, its current curriculum is nothing like the first that was taught in May 2010 and the organization’s focus has shifted paradigmatically in the last year. Dalumuzi teaches how to actively learn from your work so you can refine it and increase its potential for greater impact.
3. **Building widespread, global support for your idea:** Every idea and initiative needs to be supported by people who are not directly involved with the work. Dalumuzi share’s tips and advice on how to build political, media and financial support for your idea and initiative.
4. **Being a student of your entrepreneurial work:** Throughout the years, Dalumuzi share’s how he has used his work with Lead Us Today to enrich his learning experience as a student.

More broadly, Dalumuzi has experience developing youth leadership programs spanning seven years during which he has started 16 service-oriented youth clubs in Zimbabwe and Swaziland that involve 400+ students at any one point. He has received widespread recognition for his work: In 2012, he was named one of “Ten Outstanding Young Persons of Zimbabwe” by Junior Chamber International, was identified as an "Emerging Global Innovator" by American Express and Ashoka and was profiled as one of the 22 most impressive students at Harvard University by Business Insider, a leading business magazine in the US. In 2011, he received the prestigious College Social Innovator Award, conferred by Forbes.com and the Harvard Social Innovation Collaborative. He is also a StartingBloc and Sandbox entrepreneurship fellow. Dalumuzi is currently pursuing a Master of Science in African Studies as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford and holds a Bachelors degree in Social Studies from Harvard University.