

John Bryan: Research Brings Uganda Hope for a More Peaceful Future

After working for 25 years in the business world, John R. Bryan was ready for a change. His work for an organization that helped African refugees led him to travel to Uganda to study leadership—and to write the dissertation that would, in his words, “turn [his] life upside down.” Bryan produced a model for post-conflict leadership in Uganda that attracted international attention. Yet Bryan, a modest man, speaks of how “humbling” it is to potentially have an impact on a culture so different from his own, and still expresses surprise that anyone would be so interested in his dissertation.

Business Experiences Translates to the Arena of International Conflict

Bryan originally worked as a business consultant, holding such titles as CEO, CFO, and COO over the course of his career. He became interested in international conflict issues after joining a clinic that served the needs of African refugees in San Diego. His dissertation research emerged naturally from the work he was doing with the clinic.

“In 2006 it looked like Uganda might be headed towards peace,” he recalls. “Our organization had a meeting with some Ugandan leaders on the day they started peace talks, and one thing we learned was that they were unclear on how to lead post-conflict. I asked them if they needed a model or framework and they jumped on that idea.”

Bryan saw that he could fulfill this request while earning his doctorate at the same time. “With my background in doing strategic planning and organization, and my knowledge of the political climate in Uganda, it seemed like a natural idea to study the leadership situation there and help the leaders proceed through their transition out of conflict,” he says.

Intense Research Process Yields Powerful Results

Bryan decided to interview a group of Ugandan leaders using a technique called the Delphi research design, in which a panel of experts answer a series of questions. A facilitator then provides the panel with a summary of their answers. The experts are then encouraged to revise their answers, taking the entire group’s views into account, in the hope of achieving consensus.

Bryan asked around 70 leaders for interviews, hoping that 12 to 15, the amount he needed to create a valid model, would be willing to speak with him. Much to his surprise, 62 of them agreed to an interview. Of this cohort, Bryan chose to interview 10 *rwots*, or traditional chieftains, from the Acholi ethnic group, and two other cultural leaders. He asked them a series of open-ended questions about their concerns and the issues they found most important when moving from a conflict to a post-conflict state.

After the 12 leaders came to a consensus about which concerns and issues were most pressing, Bryan used their input to create a survey, which he administered to 47 leaders from Uganda and other East African countries. He analyzed their responses and used them to craft a plan that would help the leaders transition successfully from a conflict to a post-conflict state.

One thing that surprised Bryan about the leaders' responses was that so many of them agreed that post-conflict leaders need to forgo self-interest for the greater good of the people they're leading.

"To have the vast majority of 360 people concur with that statement was surprising," he says.

"You don't see a whole lot of evidence that leaders in most contexts want to forgo self-interest."

After returning to the United States, Bryan still found himself on a tight schedule, as he had set himself the goal of graduating while his then-90-year-old mother was still able to travel to Phoenix to see him walk in the graduation procession. This event would have special meaning for his family: Both of Bryan's parents had dropped out of doctoral programs, meaning he would be the first in his family to earn a doctoral degree.

"When I got back from Uganda I spent every waking moment analyzing the data," Bryan remembers. "There were some holes in the data that my committee wasn't concerned about, but I was. I wanted to create a model that had as much validity as possible within the Acholi community. So three weeks after collecting the original data I went back to Uganda. I got input from about 200 more people on my questionnaire, including responses from more women, young people, and other targeted groups so that my questionnaire would have more validity."

The post-conflict leadership model Bryan created was extremely well-received: In fact, members of the Ugandan parliament asked him to extend his data collection to the rest of Uganda, and

others have asked him to do similar research in such countries as Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Sudan.

“My research has taken on a life of its own,” Bryan says. “It’s turned my career upside-down. I’ve been to Uganda and Kenya twelve times since 2004. I’m a lot clearer about the potential contributions I can make, not just in a business context but in a geopolitical context as well. It’s a little unsettling, and very humbling.”

Looking to the Future

In the future, Bryan says, he’d like to expand his research to Kenya, where leaders are in the process of dealing with the aftermath of the post-election violence that occurred in 2007. And he’s still interested in the question of leadership as a whole.

“Most of the dominant leadership models and theories studied in business programs, including James MacGregor Burns’s discussion of transformational and transactional leadership, and Ken Blanchard’s theory of situational leadership, emerged in the 1960s,” he says. “But those theories arose during a completely different context than the one we’re in now. Do they still apply? My colleagues have encouraged me to explore that idea further. I’m modifying my questionnaire for the United States to see what leadership traits people find most valuable here.”

Bryan encourages current doctoral students to use their degree as a springboard to the next stage in their lives. “If you’re just doing the program to get the degree, then you might be missing out on some of the potential impact of the doctoral process,” he says. “It can be life-changing; it’s not just about that piece of paper that says you have a doctorate. It’s certainly not about wearing that cute little hat! It should be more transformative.”

And, as Bryan has proved, a doctorate can change not only an individual, but an entire nation.