

# INTRODUCTION TO RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP 2020



## EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY – Bilikiss Adebiji, Powerful African Recycling Queen & Entrepreneur <sup>1</sup>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-9hCqUrils>

Bilikiss Adebiji, a former corporate software engineer at IBM, was taking a development ventures class as part of her MBA program at the MIT Sloan School of Management. She was assigned a project aimed at finding ways to help people at the bottom socioeconomic level in her native Lagos, Nigeria. (Lagos is the capital of the state of Lagos.) In Nigeria, about 70 percent of the natives are very poor. Basic sanitation and healthcare are lacking. Adebiji wanted to make a difference by helping poor Nigerians. She was also very interested in the application of waste management and noted how managing waste through recycling had gained a hold in the U.S. environment but not in her native land.

Thinking about how recycling might help poor people and the environment in Lagos, Adebiji founded Wecyclers in 2012 and holds the position of CEO. The company is a waste collection social enterprise. Waste collection is carried out through delivery tricycles (or “cargo bikes”) that ride around poor neighborhoods and collect waste, such as empty soda bottles, from inhabitants. Participants receive rewards for every kilogram of recycled material, via points sent by SMS. The points are redeemable for goods the participants value such as cellphone minutes or household supplies.

Wecyclers sorts the trash picked up by the delivery tricycles and sells it to local recyclers. The business is possible because Lagos generates about 735,000 tons of plastic annually, worth about \$300 million to waste brokers. According to Adebiji, “That’s money lying on the street.”

Adebiji has been labeled a “Lioness of Africa” based on her leadership accomplishments. Her most obvious accomplishment is rebuilding Nigeria’s recycling center. Partner families receive an average of \$10 per month from Wecyclers, which often amounts to 20 percent of family income. About 3,400 families from poor neighborhoods are active partners.

So far the company has created more than 50 jobs, including 37 full-time managers and collectors. The average income is \$125 per month, which is \$8 above the Lagos minimum wage. Wecyclers also has an impact on the local economy because the tricycles are purchased in Lagos, and the software used to handle the text

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew J. DuBrin. (2019). *Leadership: Research Findings, Practice, and Skills*. Cengage Learning. p.1-2.

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**WEEK 4**

**REAL LIFE APPLICATION**

**KNOWING WHERE TO LEAD**

message stream is purchased from a Nigerian company. Wecyclers pays about \$1,600 in annual taxes to the Nigerian government. Furthermore, most company employees are from poor neighborhoods, and working for Wecyclers is their first official job. In commenting on her work, Adebisi says, “Wecyclers gives low-income communities a chance to develop waste and clean up their neighborhoods through an incentive-based recycling program.” In addition to her MBA from MIT, Adebisi holds a master’s degree from Vanderbilt University.<sup>1</sup>

The description of Bilikiss Adebisi touches on many leadership topics to be covered in this book, including the following ideas: that providing direction is part of a leader’s job, that technical expertise is an important leadership role, and that a strong leader can create meaningful work for people and enrich their lives.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8eR9c9FFrk>