



# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

MANAGING PARADOX MINI-CASE SERIES

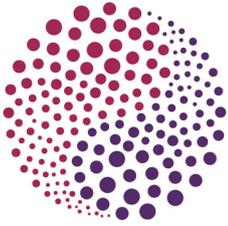
# Johnson: paradoxical lessons on personal transformation and leadership

Milton de Sousa

Nova School of Business and Economics

October 2020





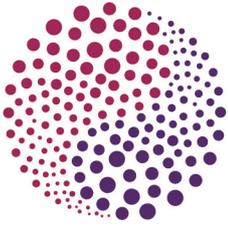
# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

## THE CASE

It was a typical summer day in Portugal. The air was dry and the temperature way above 30 degrees. We were all waiting in a small overheated room for Johnson to arrive and welcome the 40 something international MBA students that came to Portugal from the Netherlands to take part on a study trip designed around the theme of social entrepreneurship. The goal: to explore how businesses could play a role in addressing some of our most pressing social and environmental challenges. Johnson, the founder and manager of the Johnson Academy, served as one of the case studies. We were surrounded by a group of children and teenagers. Laughing and telling jokes. Curiously looking at us as some strange creatures from an outer world.

Time went by and nobody could tell where Johnson was. People started becoming nervous, especially me one of the organizers of the visit. Eventually he shows up some 25 minutes late. Johnson is a tall black man with a charismatic posture. His face is welcoming and stark at the same time. As he enters the room, all eyes on him, he smiles and apologizes for the delay. He then explains to the whole group that what kept him busy was this table football match with some of the kids in another location of the academy. Johnson takes every opportunity, even a simple table football match, to teach important lessons about respect and sportsmanship. He could not let the opportunity go. He told us also about one particular boy, not older than 10 years, that seemed to be quite a troublemaker the whole morning and that he needed to talk to. He apparently already had an history in the neighborhood for aggressive behavior, provoking other kids and stealing things from them. He had to spend some time with him. Later that day, he told us, he would try to find his parents and talk with them. No easy feat given their evasiveness and apparent careless attitude towards their son's problematic behavior. Surprisingly, given their business and protestant work ethic mindset, the group seemed to easily forgive him. Johnson does not speak English, so maybe my translation smoothed the event to create room for tolerance. Or maybe they were just so appalled by the ghetto like surroundings that they did not dare to challenge the



# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

alpha male that just entered the room. Later in the evening as we listened to him and his story, many people cried in absolute silence. Johnson told about his criminal past, what he learned, how much he failed and how he was able to steer his life from a criminal and hopeless life into something inspiring and relevant for society.

## *<sup>1</sup> Johnson's transformation*

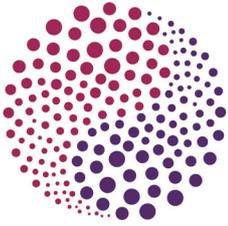
Born in Cova da Moura (one of the poorest and most problematic neighborhoods in the area of Lisbon), Johnson had a very difficult and adverse childhood, with a criminal life that started very young and that led



him to different prisons for 10 years. In prison he was often seen as a problematic inmate, known for speaking up against relentless authority. His personal change was a difficult and challenging process of revisiting his priorities, re-discovering his family values, acknowledging his mistakes and reinventing himself. Johnson tells about one particular incident, a tipping point on his path to a new life, when a social assistant for the first time treated him with respect and decided to just listen to him without judgement. They developed a relationship that played a pivotal role in Johnson's transformation.

Having transformed his life's priorities, Johnson focused on applying his personal experience to prevent risky situations for other young people in precarious situations. It was in 2014 that the opportunity arose for Johnson to open his own Association, helping youngsters of the most varied neighborhoods in the Amadora, Cova da Moura, Buraca and Boavista areas. Thanks to Johnson's influence, many youngsters have earned recognition among peers, invested in their education and internalized values of

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1: Johnson (João Semedo) at the Johnson Academy



# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

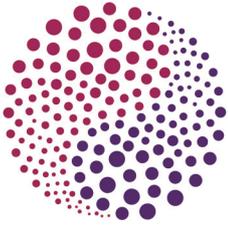
citizenship that opened new horizons for them and can take them further away as individuals. Despite his success, Johnson still lives in the same neighborhood where he grew, close to the academy, being respected by most and often mediating frequent clashes between locals and the police.

## *About the Johnson Academy*

The Johnson Academy is a non-governmental organization, located in the Zambujal Neighborhood, which aims to promote human development and well-being, through personalized mentoring of children and young people from fragile family and social environments, as well as to their families transmitting humanistic values, based on the principles of justice, equity, freedom, solidarity and self-realization. The Academy works with 181 volunteers who collaborate on a wide range of activities like, futsal, educational support, weekly reflection groups, martial arts and artistic activities, mentoring, support to the community and family, support for former prisoners

This case raises important questions:

1. What does the story of Johnson tell us about personal change and transformation?
2. What does the first part of the story tell about Johnson's leadership style?
3. Do you think Johnson could be described as a humble leader?
4. What does this case tell us about the paradoxical relationship between negative and positive?



# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

## Useful sources:

About the academy: <https://www.academiadojohnson.com/>

About Johnson's story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC9te5h1YZQ&t=2436s>

For a transition lifeline exercise: <https://www.eoslifework.co.uk/transprac.htm>

## To explore the topic of personal values:

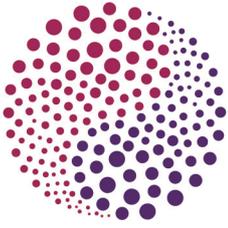
- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. Online readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1), 2307-0919.

## To understand the original ideas of servant leadership:

- Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. The Journal of Virtues & Leadership, 1(1), 25-30.
- Greenleaf, R. (2007). The servant as leader. In Corporate ethics and corporate governance (pp. 79-85). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

## About the author:

*Milton de Sousa* is Associate Professor at Nova School of Business and Economics where he teaches leadership and social responsibility. His main research interests are on servant leadership and complexity.

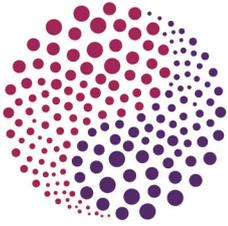


# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

## TEACHING NOTE

- The case illustrates how personal transformation involves both revisiting your past, while acknowledging your mistakes, and reinventing your narrative about the self towards something positive in the future. To this end, rediscovering your values (in Johnson's case his father and mother played an important role) is a fundamental process so that you can build your life on a stronger foundation. The importance of respect and non-judgmental listening while supporting others is also relevant in the case (the value of our identity and human dignity are fundamental aspects of human behavior). The paradoxical tensions between past and future, deconstruction and reconstruction (of your identity and self-image), punishment and forgiveness, analysis and synthesis could be explored. For example: if you focus only on punishing based on the past, without forgiveness (which involves respect and empathy), can you expect people to change positively in the future?
- Johnson is an interesting case of servant leadership (a paradoxical notion on its own). First of all, Johnson's focus on the youngsters he is trying to help is symbolic of his initial motivation to serve (and only then to lead as a way of serving better). Also, the case demonstrates that humility and self-confidence (even almost arrogance) can co-exist. Johnson is humble about his mistakes and his criminal past. He is also humble as a servant towards those he is trying to help. He is the first one to acknowledge that he has no studies and is more than willing to ask for help. At the same time, he is extremely confident and self-assured, even dominating at times when he takes stage, leaving no room for doubt that he knows what he is talking about. The case also highlights the importance of authenticity to be able to serve and lead with impact (he still lives



# European Forum on Paradox and Pluralism

Nova SBE Twinning Project

in the same place where he grew). The tensions between serving and leading, humility and confidence can be explored in explaining servant leadership.

- The case is an interesting example of the paradoxical interaction between the negative and the positive. Johnson's ability to have a positive impact is amplified by his extremely negative criminal past. One might even wonder if anyone without a criminal past could start something like he did. Only that allows him to have a deep understanding of what it is to be led into a criminal path at a very young age. The negativity and positivity are also part of his everyday life and work. For example, the fact that many parents seem to care little about their children and what they do during the day (many of them just simply skip school and go to the streets) allows him to exercise his leadership more strongly, amplifying his positive impact. He tries to involve parents to make sure they take their role in educating their children, which is a way of reducing his own influence as a leader (also relates to the servant leader aspect above).

## Areas:

Paradoxes of leadership and leadership development

## Keywords:

Johnson, Johnson Academy, Servant Leadership, Personal Change, Values