

“I SEE YOU”
Excerpt from The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook
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Among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa, the most common greeting, equivalent to “hello” in English, is the expression: *Sawu bona*. It literally means, “I see you.” If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhoma*, “I am here.” The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It’s as if when you see me, you bring me into existence.

This meaning, implicit in the language, is part of the spirit of ubuntu, a frame of mind prevalent among native people in Africa below the Sahara. The word ubuntu stems from the folk saying *Umuntu ngumuntu nagabantu*, which, from Zulu, literally translates as: “A person is a person because other people.” If you grow up with this perspective, your identity is based upon the fact that you are seen—that people around you respect and acknowledge you as a person.

During the last few years in South Africa, many corporations have begun to employ managers who were raised in tribal regions. The *ubuntu* ethic often clashes subtly with the culture of those corporations. In an office, for instance, it’s perfectly normal to pass someone in the hall, while preoccupied, and not greet him. This would be worse than a sign of disrespect under the *ubuntu* ethic; it would imply that you felt that person did not exist. Not long ago, an internal consultant who had been raised in a rural village became visibly upset after a meeting where nothing much had seemed to happen. When a project where he had played a key part came up for discussion, his role was not mentioned or acknowledged. Asked later why it bothered him so much, he said, “You don’t understand. When they spoke about the project, they did not say my name. They did not make me a person.”