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# Welcome New Research Fellow:

## Abongile Sipondo

### Using AI Coaching to Improve Resilience in Middle Managers

Abongile Sipondo, think2perform Research Institute's new research fellow, had an accomplished career working in social justice in South Africa before he shifted focus. "I was fighting for the rights of people who cannot fight for themselves," says Abongile. "When I realized the leaders we had, or even have currently, do not have the skills needed to respond to the complex challenges of the continent, it sparked an interest in leadership."

As he pursued a Master of Philosophy in leadership coaching to build his capacity as a leader, Abongile craved further inquiry and a deeper understanding of leadership. After his master's, he went straight into a Ph.D. program to study leadership, specifically, leadership coaching.

"What led me into academia is the love of knowledge and the yearning to create knowledge," says Abongile. "Also to contribute towards developing better leaders in the African continent and globally." In support of better leaders, both his academic study and his professional experience reveal that coaching is an effective tool. However, the current model of human-to-human coaching is expensive, and few people have access

to it. "One of my ambitions is to make coaching accessible to as many people as possible at a fraction of the cost," says Abongile. "Because artificial intelligence develops quite quickly, I feel it is one way coaching can be democratized."

Abongile's research project will study how artificial intelligence coaching can improve resiliency in middle managers. He is currently doing a scoping review to better understand the ways human coaches support psychological resilience. The second part of his research will be the development of an AI coaching chatbot. "The reason I'm doing the scoping review is so that the algorithms we feed into the chatbot are based on scientifically proven information and researched data," says Abongile. "Then we are going to test middle managers in the workplace to determine if the chatbot is effective in improving or enhancing resilience." Abongile chose to study middle managers because of the unique stressors they face in catering to the demands of top executives while also effectively supervising staff. "By coaching them [middle managers] to be more resilient leaders, they will be in a position where they can lead with purpose, they can lead with vision, they can lead their teams in a more fruitful and more purposeful manner," says Abongile.

The study will feature a randomized controlled trial with two groups: one group receives the AI chatbot coaching intervention, the other group does not. Both groups will complete the Brief Resiliency Scale questionnaire before and after the trial to measure any impact of the intervention against the baseline and control group.

The app will initially launch in English, and if successful, Abongile hopes to develop it in other languages, including Swahili and French, which are commonly spoken in parts of Africa.

Abongile's research interests extend beyond resilience coaching and artificial intelligence coaching to include diversity in coaching and elevating Africa's role in the leadership conversation. "I'm interested in how African leadership can contribute to the theory of leadership," says Abongile. But he also sees himself as a global citizen with a desire to tangibly advance leadership around the world.

"We don't want research that just gathers dust, we want research that is going to have a real impact in people's lives," says Abongile. "I'm hoping to be part of a movement towards making leadership theory applicable to as many people as possible. Ultimately, we will have better leaders to lead people in this challenging time and space."

As Abongile's research progresses, we will update you on new developments and discoveries.

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