

## A TRIBUTE TO NELSON R MANDELA

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Nelson Mandela is an iconic, legendary political leader who was pivotal in liberating and then uniting South Africa sociopolitically. He had a sound and solid appreciation of South Africa as a political economy that was shackled multidimensionally by apartheid.

He perceived apartheid as the politics of oppression and suppression as much as he fathomed it as the economics of exclusion and exploitation. In his 1953 address to the ANC (Transvaal) Congress titled 'No Easy Walk to Freedom', Nelson Mandela exhorted the members to be, '... prepared for them (ie oppressors) like men in business who do not waste energy in vain talk and idle action'.

The reference to men in business is interesting, coming as it does from the radically outspoken Mandela who at that stage certainly lent his ear to socialists in the movement. Of even greater significance is the fact that he was a subscriber to and an exponent of the Freedom Charter, whose tone and thrust are essentially socialist and advocated forms of nationalisation.

On reflection it is evident that Mandela never allowed himself to come ensconced in any ideological isms except realism and pragmatism.

Shortly after his release from prison he was invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he engaged in serious discourse with both political and business world leaders on economic and political challenges of the day. The thoughts and ideas he distilled from those profound conversations changed the course of South Africa's economic history – from socialism, as advocated by many during the struggle for liberation, to the pragmatism of a mixed economy that took root with the advent of South Africa's democracy.

The South African economy, which had been in sharp decline under apartheid, was turned around and grew by a moderate 2,7% per annum during Mandela's Presidency. More importantly, though, changes in policy during this period laid the groundwork for much higher levels of growth in the next decade.

After a rocky start to economic policy formulation, the contentious Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policies were launched in 1996. They set out a cohesive framework that helped to open up the economy, instil fiscal and monetary discipline and encourage private sector investment. The resulting fall in government's debt service costs helped fuel the massive expansion in social spending in subsequent administrations. GEAR was later criticised for not delivering on all its promises, but that was because it had never been fully implemented, particularly in terms of its labour policies. The relationship between government and big business improved under Mandela's leadership, with many roleplayers prevailed upon to go beyond the call of duty and build schools and clinics. Public-private partnerships as a cooperation philosophy and modus operandi gained momentum under his presidency.

Nelson Mandela wrote no manual on leadership – political or economic. He led and taught by example. I had the singular fortune of persuading him to write a foreword to my book, *Let Africa Lead*. In it he outlines some of his philosophical beliefs about business.

'In an era of impoverished morality and self-centred leadership,' he said, 'it is well to be reminded that leaders have a primary responsibility to care about people and should make every effort to serve them. This is not a high-handed impracticality. It is good advice for those who want to be effective, and respected, as leaders.'

He advised those who deride ubuntu (African humanism) as too soft and unworkable for business, that humanness does not weaken business – it strengthens it. It cements the relationships on which teamwork and innovation must rest. It builds trust among employees, customers and communities. Both teamwork and trust are vital components of worldclass enterprises today. They embody the positive values of the 'triple bottomline' of business sustainability.

It is clear that sustainability and moral leadership go hand in hand. The alternative of cutthroat practices and sheer exploitation inevitably leads to the destruction of the economic and social foundations on which enterprises have to depend. An immoral reality can bring about its own demise.

Mandela further advises that there are many roads to growth, but in Africa a sense of common purpose is our best bet for development and change. Africa is imbued with the values of ubuntu and it is both natural and commercially sensible to work within the existing cultural and moral system. We need to encourage South African enterprises to participate in construction and development across the continent with the goal of sustainable development. Entrepreneurship needs to be understood in the broadest sense as reflecting the same common impulse that motivates enlightened leaders throughout Africa, namely to overcome suffering and fight poverty.

In both business and politics Mandela maintains that the leader gets things done by consulting, listening, setting objectives and insisting on delivery.

When all is said and done, Mandela was an at-your-service leader who embodied a value system that is most worthy of emulation. In a life fully lived he successfully redefined the term 'emergent' from one of condescension and derision to one of economic, political and cultural vibrancy, commanding unconditional global respect. This is a leadership defined by moral authority and suasion, probity, humility, integrity, passion and compassion. He did not shy away from the difficult or unpopular decisions and measures. His leadership generated trust, goodwill and confidence and was politically and personally as gracious, honourable and magnanimous in adversity as in success.

The features of Mandela's leadership were on display for the world to see, although there has been very little actual analysis as to why he was so effective. He represented a collective ethic of reconciliation for a nation that was still deeply conflicted. The polarised races wanted to learn and live together, but they needed a leader who would symbolise this yearning: Mandela did that commendably.

There was nothing abstract or mythical about his attuned leadership. It was down to earth. The personal qualities he brought to the Presidency included:

- Insightful empathy: Seeing the world from the vantage point of those one seeks to influence and embracing their world views non-judgementally – 'walking in their moccasins', so to speak. Attuned leadership is as passionate as it is compassionate.
- Inspiration: Engendering in others a sense of self-worth, pride in themselves and hope for the future. In the relationship between the leader and the led, it is vital to strike a balance between reality and potentiality.
- Commitment: Ardently pursuing an agreed course of action, but remaining willing to be flexible and responsive to essential changes in the environment or in expectations.
- Probity: Assuring others that the leader can, and should, be held accountable. Probity is the ethical imperative to remain upright and honest in service and behaving in a manner that is beyond reproach.

Mandela acquitted himself with distinction on all of these counts.

We salute Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela with a profound sense of gratitude and pride. He was a man of destiny, imbued with unparalleled clarity of personal and national vision, propelled by a sense of mission that entertained no scope for failure, a superb liberation struggle strategist, a supreme national unifying force, and an heroic, legendary leader of global stature.