

## NELSON MANDELA: CHAMPION WITHIN

### A BRIEF REFLECTION

By Dr Reuel J Khoza, 11 March 2014

John Maxwell, well-known leadership guru, say: “Leadership is influence – nothing more nothing less.” That is a bit simplistic even flippant Gangsters too have influence. Leadership has an in-built moral challenge: there is good and bad leadership. Bad leadership depends on coercion and is devoid of moral authority. Good leadership is that where influence is not demanded, but earned. In fact the relationship between leader and follower is central to attuned leadership. Leadership does not imply a one way flow of either power or influence. Rather each flows both ways between leaders and followers in a process of mutual human engagement. It is the followers’ appreciation of their leaders’ qualities that turn them into followers. The key phrase is mutual engagement: no whiff of coercion in genuine leadership which is based on moral authority. Each side willingly participates in the enterprise and both leader and follower are enriched by the process.

I see Nelson Mandela as the leader who fits the bill and who epitomises what I call personhood, a deep awareness of self and calmness that is comforting to followers.

Richard Stengel, a Time magazine editor who worked with Mandela on his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, has distilled eight lessons of leadership from Mandela’s life.

The lessons highlight qualities of Ubuntu in Mandela the man but also draw attention to the relational aspects of his leadership.

Stengel draws attention the apparent paradoxes in Mandela’s style of leadership. By turns he shows humility and personal pride; long-term patience and a sense of urgency; warmth towards strangers and aloofness from his immediate circle. One could quibble with some of these characterisations but as Stengel says, Mandela’s sense of justice dominates his approach, overcoming all contradictions. He will ‘always stand up for what he believes is right with a stubbornness that is virtually unbending’. And he is confident that this ethical position will win support. He entered into negotiations with the white nationalists to bring an end to apartheid even when the followership seemed to doubt him, and was ultimately vindicated.

The personal qualities that Stengel and many others have described and praised may suggest that leadership inheres in the character of the man. But leadership is a feature of human relations; the personhood of the leader rests on the appreciation of the community. Inner reflection and outward acts must resonate with the needs and destiny of the followership, or any bid to lead will be hollow. Leadership, furthermore, is embedded in the institutions of authority, and we see leaders emerging at every level in those institutions. In corporate life, team leaders can energise people in their departments by exhibiting the very qualities that successful senior executives strive to display at top level: imagination, purpose, discipline and integrity. In politics, trade unionism and local civic affairs, leaders high and low are pressed into service for the sake of their followers, and if they fall short they become leaders in limbo. To be a leader it helps to have engaging personality traits. Yet ultimately it is engagement with the concerns of the followership that decides how much support the leader gets.

Thus we must distinguish the leader as a person from leadership as a set of principles and practices. Obviously, many people are not cut out to be leaders because they lack something – perhaps communication skills, or passion, or a desire to serve others. Even those who are born with the necessary personal traits are not born into leadership: they must remake themselves according to the situations that confront them and their communities. Leaders are born, then made. In the process, they must undergo some form of training and development.

Mandela was born to a princely line and grew up surrounded by models of leadership. He stepped into a leadership role in the ANC during the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s and continued to grow in stature by committing himself to the armed struggle, then facing trial for his life, and finally going to prison. As Stengel said in a Time magazine article the freedom fighter who went into jail in his forties was not the same man who came out 27 years later at age 71, seasoned by solitude and dedicated to national reconciliation. The steel in Mandela's soul was forged in the fires of struggle, but it was isolation and suffering that drew forth compassion in the older man.

Mandela's example demonstrates that the term LEADERSHIP means GOOD LEADERSHIP and not just any kind of populist rabble rousing of dictatorship: leadership must have an ethical core to be regarded as leadership at all. In this sense leadership is unashamedly normative, setting an ideal standard or model for followers to follow.

One of the things that South Africans have experienced as a nation, under Mandela's leadership and which we can share with the whole of humanity, is the idea of a leadership that resonates with the followership. The leader listens to the echo chamber of the nation's history and finds a measure of consonance with the followership's current needs. Most importantly, the leadership should resonate with the aspirations of the followers, knowing what it is that deep in their psyche they long for, and what they wish they could become, given where they are at this juncture. This idea of leadership is not populism or domination, but ethically centred and devoted to the common good.