

Africa's leadership challenge
10 October 2001

In line with the President of South Africa, His Excellency, Thabo Mbeki, and as Chairman of Eskom, along with many other business leaders, I believe in the President's vision of an African renaissance and we align ourselves with the view that Africa has the potential to become an economic and political success.

In accordance with this belief, Eskom is fully dedicated to the delivery for the national economy as well as to repositioning Eskom as a continental and even a global player. Eskom has a presence in 26 countries on the continent. This presence assumes the form of mainly joint venture partnerships as well as operations and management contracts, plant refurbishments and overall turnaround situations with regard to certain utilities. In a real sense, Eskom provides leadership on the continent by igniting the economies and advancing socio-economic development. We do this by literally and metaphorically bringing light and the energy to the continent. Furthermore, on a selective basis Eskom, through Eskom Enterprises, is developing economies elsewhere in the world such as Iraq, India, Turkey, Chile and the Philippines. It is necessary to mention this, not so much to illustrate Eskom's achievements but to demonstrate our leadership in practice in Africa and a sense of efficacy from Africans that is not always evident. If anything, Africa and Africans have come to be characterised by an insidious and pernicious lack of belief in self. For too long, we have as Africans externalised the blame for our predicament. We have blamed everyone, from the colonial powers to today's world financial agencies, to pestilence and to other acts of God. We believe ourselves captive to and victims of the environment. While we externalise the blame, so we also externalise the locus of control. We render ourselves powerless.

As Africans, we have a characteristic in common with most of humankind: we find it extremely difficult to see a solution to a seemingly intractable, all-consuming situation that seems to have existed forever. Africa has struggled under a multitude of crushing burdens that many have come to regard as a matter of course; as afflictions rather than as effects. Those without a historical perspective of the degradation of the continent as a result of slavery and colonialism, and who have just awoken to this reality, call it the "African condition" - congenital, without hope, without remedy.

Those who appreciate the deep-seated impact of the historical imposts of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and more lately of globalisation and of the venality of Africa's leadership, those who do not accept this as being ordained, inevitable nor even characteristic of the continent; those who do not depart from the premise that Africans are genetically hard-wired to fail, merely see it as the "African crisis", the result of reversible and / or remediable circumstances, however intractable they may seem.

Africa's destiny

They believe that Africa's destiny will not be a consequence of predestination but the consequence of human will and application. Africa has a date with destiny, a positive destiny, and implicit in this fundamental belief in Africa's date with destiny, is an understanding of history as being cyclical; as ever-evolving and not frozen in time. Hence

the concept of a renaissance, a rebirth, a return to greatness, or simply the coming of a new age. Therefore, my abiding belief is that notwithstanding anything, Africa will transform. The catalytic element that is crucial and central to that transformation is leadership.

Given the requisite leadership, it is possible to conceptualise a very different Africa, an Africa whose time has come ... if we make it come:

An Africa that is more excited by its future than its past

An Africa whose scope for growth is limited only by its imagination

An Africa that has successfully translated its concepts of humanity and communal relations into vibrant success.

The African in my dream...

Forms of co-operative models of government, institutional and individual relations will create -

an Africa whose children are fed by native produce;

an Africa whose intellectuals are nurtured by native foundation principles and insatiable inquiry;

an Africa whose industry is fuelled by native technology and skills;

an Africa whose airwaves and media are dominated by issues of native concerns, images and aspirations;

an Africa that redefines the term "emergent" from a notion of condescension and derision to a term of economic, political and cultural vibrancy, and technological prowess;

an Africa where its natives both at home and in the diaspora, as well as other citizens of the world, as a matter of choice invest their time, resources, aspirations and lives in the future of their children;

an Africa that seeks and employs the advice, skills, technology and resources of others for its own ends and to a chosen destination, and not to serve the agenda of others;

an Africa who is matriarch and sculptor of her own destiny!

Deepest aspirations

It may be that I am dreaming. If it were so, it would be good. It is necessary that our leaders should all dream, but the dreaming I refer to occurs not in our sleep but in our waking moments. For it is in the dreams of our waking moments that we reveal our deepest aspirations; those dreams in waking moments which, when subjected to our will and our ability to translate them into a desired reality, truly become visions. Those who support Africa can help and encourage us, but in the final analysis, Africa will be the instrument of her own salvation; it is through her transformational leadership that Africa will transform herself:

A leadership whose defining features are probity, humility, integrity, compassion and humanity

A leadership that stands for the truth and affirmation of the good, and whose primary pursuit is noble causes and the common good

A leadership that demonstrates competence, tenacity and a sense of efficacy;

A leadership that does not shy away from the difficult nor the unpopular decisions or measures

A leadership that practises introspection and self-renewal

A leadership that lives by the tenets of consultation, persuasion, accommodation and cohabitation, and shuns coercion and domination

A leadership that generates trust, goodwill and confidence and is politically and personally as gracious, honourable and magnanimous in defeat as in success

A leadership which understands that the success of others does not diminish its own success but adds to the good of the commonwealth

A leadership that deeply believes that the locus of control for Africa's future is within Africa herself

A leadership that acts as much for today as it does for the future

A leadership that does not consume seed capital but invests it for ensuing generations

A leadership which bridges the schisms and cleavages wrought by the religious, tribal, social, ideological, economic and political diversity that characterises much of Africa's polities

A leadership that understands the difference between cause and effect and for whom the means are as important as the ends

A leadership that is visionary and compassionate.

Not mythical

The leadership to which I refer, is not mythical. It does exist in Africa and is epitomised by our own icon, the living embodiment of African leadership: Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela who is an example of what Warren Bennis, the noted leadership expert, might refer to as servant leadership, where the true leader is the servant of all. Such a quality of leadership is not unique nor is it the result of pre-ordination. It is the result of choice, discipline and application. Mandela does not have these leadership qualities because he is great. Mandela is great because he has these leadership qualities.

The leadership to which I refer, understands that they are not leaders because they have power, public acclaim, wealth or privileged access. They do not confuse cause and effect.

They do not compound the conundrum of leadership by elevating the effects of leadership, i.e. power, wealth and acclaim, as ends in and of themselves, sought and exercised as virtues in and of themselves. They fully understand that the pursuit of these effects as ends in and of themselves lead us down pathways where it matters not how we acquire these effects nor for what purpose we employ them: it leads to corruption and venality. The leadership I refer to will set us all firmly on the road to regeneration through exemplary leadership, setting high targets for themselves and everyone who takes up the challenge. Their solutions and strategies will be, above all, do-able and sustainable. The principles of their strategies will be designed to be applicable from generation to generation, remaining as effective and as valuable as when they began. A leadership which (to paraphrase James McCune Smith commenting on the 19th-century African-American leader of great stature, Frederick Douglass's, successful leadership) will "...furthermore prove possible what had hitherto been regarded as an impossible reform, and then become a shining light on which the aged may look with gladness, the young with hope, the downtrodden as a representative of what they themselves may become".

Profound legacy

The leadership to which I refer, will dip deep into the profound African leadership legacy that we have shamefully neglected to codify, disseminate and assimilate. The legacy that exhorts us to -

concur with King Shaka Ka Senzangakhona that there can be no change without challenge;

resonate with King Moshoeshe of the Basotho's insistence that mastering the context from situational analysis, is key to leadership success;

accord with Mozambique's Magigwani of Magudu's charge to his followers, to out-innovate their adversaries and contestants in war and peace;

harken to the African echo chamber of wisdom as it admonishes us not to worry about high position, but to be concerned with playing our roles properly;

reaffirm Kwame Nkrumah's exhortation that Africa be self-reliant, self-assertive and autonomous;

heed Madiba's dictum that a leader is someone who fearlessly bears the consequences of his or her decisions, who does not strive to be popular, but walks the road to which he or she is committed.

The journey is long.

The incline steep.

But the challenge is surmountable.

Failure is not an option. Despair is not an option. Africa has the wisdom and the ability to

be all of these things. The catalyst that will make this destiny manifest is leadership.

Leadership in practice is about identifying those challenges and providing the vision, the will, the courage and the enablement for even the infirm among us to scale the peak in a manner consistent with our highest potential. For Africa, it is about achieving what has been regarded as the unthinkable ... a continent equal among nations, admired, envied even, for the trajectory of its course. We at Eskom have been doing our best to meet our leadership challenge, to scale our own peaks ... from the Maluti, the Drakensberg, through to Kilimanjaro and on to the Atlas Mountains and even the Andes. Through our unique technology we have the Himalayas and even the Urals in our sights. We believe that in time to come we will also plant our flag even on the Alps and the Rocky Mountains. President Thabo Mbeki, in the exercise of leadership in practice, has had occasion to reflect deeply, and to expound on these issues and themes. Allow me to conclude with his eloquent and inspirational words:

“Those who complete the marathon course will do so only because they do not, as fatigue sets in, convince themselves that the road ahead is still too long, the incline too steep, the loneliness impossible to bear and the prize itself of doubtful value. We too, as the peoples of South Africa and Africa, must together run our own Comrades Marathon, as comrades who are ready to take to the road together, refusing to be discouraged by the recognition that the road is very long, the incline very steep and that, at times, what we see as the end is but a mirage. When the race is run, all humanity and ourselves will acknowledge the fact we only succeed because we believed in our own dreams. Every year the rains will fall to bless our efforts,

That too is a dream! But because it is our dream, we are able still to demand of our ancestors.

Pula! Nala!”