

**Leadership: history, Africa, trends and the
Titans
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I suppose we are all familiar with the ancient Chinese imprecation, “I curse you, live in an important age”. One practical implication of this strange curse is that in a sense we are all as damned, encumbered and burdened as we are charmed, blessed and free to achieve. In this important age we are as cursed with the spell of a famine of leadership as we are blessed with a feast of leadership. The choice is essentially ours. We can either develop, nourish and unleash the leadership talent that is all around us, or allow it to wither on the vine and continue lamenting the paucity of leadership in present-day South Africa.

I am inclined to resist itemising the Boy Scout-type leadership traits one should seek. May I submit however that leadership is as intellectual or cognitive as it is emotional. At the emotional level, leaders create followers because they generate:

Certainty in people who are vacillating

Action where there is hesitation

Expertise where there was floundering

Optimism where there was cynicism

Conviction that the future will be better

Practically, rationally, the leader plays the following roles:

Pathfinding: predicated on a compelling vision and mission, inculcating in followers a sense of destination and transcendent purpose

Aligning: ensuring that the organisational structure, systems and personal processes all contribute to achieving the shared mission and vision

Empowering: igniting the fire within followers that unleashes their latent talent, ingenuity and creativity to do whatever is necessary and consistent with the principles agreed upon, so as to accomplish their common values, vision and mission.

It is against this background that it is proper for us in this place at this time to interrogate the concept and context of leadership in our organisations, our country and our continent.

History teaches us that real leaders have always been few and far between. The human experience through the ages is characterised by the presence of a great number of individuals and communities doing good and bad things. Yet there is a paucity of true leaders. The presence of sages, that is, those rare individuals with exceptional qualities to envision a different world and make things happen, has been a rare phenomenon throughout history.

I was asked to tackle the questions: Do we have enough leaders in the country? What are the qualities of true leaders we should seek?

Permit me to deviate to the theme for this gathering: “New Generation Leadership: empowering African leaders with a mindset for success.” I shall attempt to answer the suggested questions in the short time I have by highlighting some realities that I believe might spur us all to probe deeper and further. I also hope that this is but the beginning of more conversations through which we shall share our experiences and tell our stories with the end goal of becoming better people and better leaders. I say this because I am convinced that we do not know enough about what our country and our continent have to offer all of us. Most of what we know is what we have been fed by other people.

As we continue with the task of transforming our country, we ought to deepen our understanding of leadership and sharpen our leadership skills to meet the demands of our time. Self-knowledge is a sine qua non in this regard. Our knowledge of Africa is critical in the way we ought to do things differently. One is instructed by that old African proverb: ‘Until lions have their own historians, all stories about hunting will glorify the hunter.’

Do we in South Africa and Africa have enough leaders with the qualities necessary to propel this country and this continent towards a better future? This question presupposes an admission that the past has not demonstrated that we had them, or have them now. Therefore, we need to start by asking the question: What went wrong? It is important to answer this question so that we shall be able to understand why whenever people speak of leaders today, be they in Africa or outside, the names that are invoked are invariably of those who are not African. Names such as Jack Welch, JB Watson, JF Kennedy, Winston Churchill, and since the terrible events of September 11, 2001, Rudolf Giuliani, are given without questioning and at times in the wrong context. Occasionally, those who are better informed would turn to Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Almost never would you hear names such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; Sekou Toure of Guinea; Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Murtalla Mohamed of Nigeria; Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso; Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya; or the earlier leaders of Africa: Makeda Queen of Sheba; Nzshinga, Queen of Matamba; Shaka kaSenzangakhona, the founder King of Zulus; Moshoeshoe, the King of Basotho; Khama the Good, King of Batswana; Maharero, the leader of the Hereros against the German occupation of Namibia; and Magigwani Khosa of Kampfumo, Mozambique; to mention but a few. Conceptualisers, commentators and communicators of the leadership concept and attendant challenges typically include such names as Peter Senge, Warren Bennis, Gary Hammel and John Kotter. Lamentably, there are no African intellectuals of stature who have taken serious trouble to reflect on, codify and write about our idea of leadership.

In the context of the virtually total ignorance of people who made Africa survive so many calamities, both natural and man-made, how can we as Africans truly view ourselves positively as equals to those who created texts after texts depicting us as needing help, needing leaders from other historical contexts to set us free from ourselves?

Our research shows that most, if not all, African languages have the same appreciation of leadership. Leadership is influence. It is the ability to secure followers. Leaders are in essence individuals who influence ordinary people to do extraordinary things in the face of adversity.

I accept to be true what Wafula Okomu meant when he wrote: “African leaders always understood that they had a moral, political and economic responsibility to serve their people in a more ethical, accountable and transparent manner throughout history.” We do know from both what we read and what we have observed as African children that values such as compassion, altruism, caring and sharing in a communal setting, interdependence, inclination towards consensus, appreciation of hierarchy and spirituality are attributes intrinsic to African people. We have witnessed ourselves how some of these norms and values have aided us to shape a new nation in the past eight years since CODESA.

Leadership, however, is a paradoxical challenge. It calls for a rare ability to deal with polarities.

Even though society hankers for democratic leaders with the common touch, the same society wants leaders who are uncommon, charismatic, heroic and visionary.

Even though society wants a decent, caring and compassionate leader, yet everybody’s admiration goes towards cunning, guileful and even ruthless and manipulative leaders.

Though society admires a leader who adopts an above-politics, non-partisan line, yet the better and more effective politicians are those who are creative and have mastery of the art of politics.

Though society desires a leader who can unify diverse people and interests, yet such behaviour requires an effective leader to take a firm stand, as if to say that society needs divisive unifiers and unifying dividers.

It is true that society expects bold, visionary, innovative leaders who are pragmatic in their response to public opinion.

Society wants leaders who are self-confident and strong-minded, yet it is suspicious of leaders who regard themselves as infallible and beyond reproach.

Even though the majority of our populations are female, yet those deciding on their behalf are predominantly male.

One of the universal truths of our time is that there is a genuine hunger for compelling, creative and transformative leadership. The fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity is intellectual, in that as we claim to know too much about our leaders, we know too little about leadership. It would appear that there are more managers in our world than leaders. We must understand that leaders lead and managers manage. Leaders innovate; managers keep the status quo. Leaders are transformational, managers are positional.

Back to the question: do we have enough leaders in the country? I humbly submit we do. Yes, we do, but we just do not know where they are. Yes, it might just be that they have not been discovered yet. Yes, it might be that there are too many stumbling blocks in their way.

Yes, it might be that the situation is not yet ripe for them to lead. Yes, if only we allow the potential of this country to manifest itself through its diversity and the reservoir of

goodwill among most South Africans to contribute to real development and real growth of this country. And I do not mean just economic growth, but also growth within the people who have been denied the opportunity to excel with their gifts and talents. In South Africa, we need to go beyond the very important key competencies of leadership in organisations: financial management, project management, corporate governance and an ability to work in a technological environment. We need to contextualise all these good norms by convincing ourselves that we are in Africa.

That means that the leadership style that shall make Africans succeed must be African in outlook, orientation and foresight. That the prism through which we must look at both the definitions of problems and the resolutions of those problems must be African. 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, through -

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 difficult or 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;

a leadership that is politically and personally as gracious, honourable and magnanimous in defeat as in success;

a leadership that understands that the success of others does not diminish their own success but adds to the common wealth;

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 the generations to come;

a leadership that bridges the schisms and cleavages wrought by the religious, tribal,

social, ideological, economic and political diversity that characterises much of Africa's politics;

a leadership that understands the difference between cause and effect;

a leadership for whom the means are as important as the ends;

a leadership that is visionary.

The leadership I refer to is not mythical, it does exist in Africa and is epitomised by our own icon, the living embodiment of African transformational leadership. I refer, of course, to Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela, 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. This quality of leadership is not unique nor is it the result of preordination. 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 I refer to 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, to 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, nor to 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.

The leadership I refer to will dip deep into the profound African leadership legacy that we have shamefully neglected to codify, assimilate and disseminate. The legacy that exhorts us to concur with King Shaka Ka Senzangakhona that there can be no change without challenge; resonate with King Moshoeshoe of the Basotho's insistence that mastering the context from situational analysis is key to leadership success; accord with Mozambique's Magigwani Khosa of Kampfumo'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 Nkruma'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, who walks the road to which he or she is committed.

May I conclude by sharing with you what I, in concurrence with Dave Ulrich, a partner in Global Consulting Alliance, believe the leaders of the future will be known for.

Twenty-first century leaders in Africa and the world over will be known -

less for what they say and more for what they deliver;

less by their title and position and more by their expertise and competence;

less by what they control and more by what they shape;

less by the goals they set and more by the mind-sets they build;

both for great personal integrity and for exceptional organisational capabilities.

I trust that South Africa, Africa, will not be found wanting. 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 this kind of leadership.