

Nelson R. Mandela: epitome of leadership In practice

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Nelson Mandela: Lessons in Leadership

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Global moral leader, African humanist, passionate for life, compassionate, visionary, strategic, committed, persistent, results focused. All these and myriad more positive adjectives describe the leadership legend that is Nelson Mandela. A fitting characterisation though is “epitome of effective leadership in practice”.

Mandela has written no book on the theory of leadership, no field book, and no manual on how to lead. Understandably, these would be superfluous, because his entire life is ample demonstration of impactful leadership in practice. Analysis, interpretation and recording of Nelson Mandela’s approach to leadership are left to those who care to observe, take note, learn and preserve what the man has accomplished, continues to do and bequeath to humanity.

It would take a treatise to sample adequately what the man represents in the arena of leadership. The following is but a dipstick taken into the vast well of leadership that this towering legend stands for.

Great leadership flows from the ability to engage others from their point of view, understanding their assumptions or worldviews, and carefully marshalling arguments to move them to your point of view. Through empathy, transforming adversaries into allies. Tata personifies a leadership whose defining features are probity, humility, integrity, empathy and humaneness. He is known to live by the tenets of consultation, persuasion and cooperation, and shuns coercion and domination.

As a universal ethical leader, only he could reprimand President George Bush and admonish Prime Minister Tony Blair against the attack on Iraq on grounds seen by him to be shaky and indefensible. As things turn out, he is continually vindicated.

As a resourceful leader, Mandela has over the years practised introspection and self-renewal. A profound thinker who shuns the temptation to take himself too seriously. Lighthearted, he has no problem with laughing at himself. One morning as we were flying from Wonderboom to Harding (Southern KwaZulu-Natal) to open a school, he related a story about a prosecutor during the Rivonia trial who approached him as he was taking a nap during lunch and yelled: “Mandela, why do you waste valuable time now, you’ll have ample time to sleep on Robben Island!”

This is the same leader who led the change that is depolarising a nation racially polarised for centuries, a man whose transformational leadership humanised an apartheid-riddled nation and led the emergence of a nation deserving of global adulation. His catalytic effect softened the hardened stances of the haves and have-nots, and aligned them in pursuit of a constructive common purpose. Further afield in Africa, he was able to extract penitence from Libya sequent to her obdurate belligerence following the Lockerbie air disaster. The

rest is history and the staff legends are made of.

Madiba epitomises at-your-service leadership. In 1996 when certain media tried to drive a wedge between him and the rest of the ANC, he proclaimed in rebuttal: "I matured politically within the ranks of a movement and a leadership that were critical in shaping my outlook. I am a product of the mire that our society was. On occasion, like other leaders, I have stumbled, and cannot claim the sparkle alone on a glorified perch" (Sunday Times, February 25, 1996, p.24). This is the nub of Mandela's core belief in collective leadership.

The inevitable question is: what is the genesis of this well-nigh impeccable leadership? The answer is that there is a leadership architecture that can be discerned in traditional African society. Strong leaders and leadership systems have an organisational infrastructure; in particular a group of counsellors that surrounded the leader, and like the leader had an intimate understanding of the worldview, the mythology and the knowledge systems of the community. The counsellors were typically "greyheads", but they performed diverse functions. They may have been diviners, spiritual leaders, praise singers, royal vituperators, environmentalists or war strategists, but they had one function in common: they advised, cajoled and critiqued the leader. It is this leadership infrastructure - the leadership collectivism that pursued group survival and defended group claims. It is this architecture that held the leadership centre intact, enabling it to manage the differences that may have arisen as a result of ethnic identities, language and religion. Most crucially, the leadership collective managed the equitable distribution of land and, therefore, wealth.

In the case of Nelson Mandela, these "greyheads" may have included leaders such as Dr Moroka, Chief Albert Luthuli, Yusuf Cachalia, and Walter Sisulu. During his trial in 1962, Mandela asserted: "...The structure and organisation of early African societies in this country fascinated me very much and greatly influenced the evolution of my political outlook. The land, then the main means of production, belonged to the whole tribe and there was no individual ownership whatsoever. There were no classes, no rich or poor, and no exploitation of man by man. All men were free and equal and this was a foundation of government. Recognition of this general principle found expression in the constitution of the council, variously called imbizo or pitso or kgotla which governs the affairs of the tribe. The council was so completely democratic ..." (Meer, Fatima, *High than Hope - Rolihlahla we love you*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988, p. 10.)

Nelson Mandela commendably straddles these values and value system so deeply embedded in African traditional and cultural archetypes, and modern leadership challenges. With essential modification, modern-day complex leadership is built and developed on what is clearly a sound and solid ethical base.

Effective leaders such as Rolihlahla are complex personalities because they have to deal with complexity, e.g. they are able to rise above adversity with a mixture of humility and chutzpah; they are inspirational risk-takers, but operate with a "charter psychology" and strike social contracts across interest groups in the community; they have charisma and credibility; they are indefatigable, but at the same time excellent communicators with an understanding of the importance of drama; they understand the complexity of the history of the community, but offer simple, elegant solutions. Most importantly, they know themselves, having understood and overcome childhood experiences through the ability to bounce back incessantly.

Madiba's leadership is a perennial source of inspiration in that it generates trust, goodwill and confidence. It is demonstrably politically and personally as gracious, honourable and magnanimous in defeat as in success; it amply illustrates that the locus of control for Africa's future is within Africa itself; it is profoundly visionary.