

leadership

Challenge or risk?

*towards a new age
of leadership*



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First-rate leadership is a demanding responsibility requiring fortitude, perseverance, self-control and a well-formulated plan. Good leaders have solid judgement – they know the difference between a challenge and a risk. They also know that skill and ability are often dependent on developing a deep understanding of issues surrounding self and others, and that processes must be mastered to achieve the desired results. Their efforts are underscored by time, and are actively developed and matured through conscious effort and application.

South Africa yawned itself into awareness of its condemnation on the world stage in 1974 when television was introduced. The Soweto riots in 1976 followed. The rest is history.

Nelson Mandela, incarcerated 1963-1990 and president in 1994, is an international icon who epitomises excellence in leadership. From an era of conflict, inequity and sanctions, a national identity is being forged based on shared values.

ABSTRACT: Real and effective leadership depends greatly on the ability of the leader to remove his or her own egotistical requirements from the spectrum and learn to inspire, listen to and acknowledge, the human beings whose development they are entrusted to nurture. As South Africans, we have learnt some invaluable lessons about this process. If we can carry those lessons through to other areas of leadership, we will be well on track to achieving the most desirable outcomes of any leadership process.

The process of change was neither simple nor easy. As a nation we have been compelled to listen, learn, consider and reconsider our actions. Through this process, we have tapped into one of the most basic human skills — allowing others to speak and then listening.

Over time, and with sincere intent, a leadership culture is thus being upheld. What we have discovered is that it is when individuals are not acknowledged as human beings that leadership becomes fallible.

The first hurdle on the path of leadership is gaining a broader, contextualised understanding of the environment and the variables that impact outcomes. For individuals with leadership abilities, the real road to greatness starts with an understanding of self. The process includes the recognition that personal motivations, passions, values and experiences prompt actions and reactions – all of which have a particular impact on other people, our environment and, more fundamentally, directly impact future outcomes. The ultimate aim is to better integrate personal values, tailoring behaviour and responses to simultaneously maximise the realisation of personal and other potential on a number of fronts.

By recognising and harnessing our own abilities, we are empowered to release inherent skills in others.

Public recognition of injustice was required to defuse the situation in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought considerable closure to people of diverse backgrounds. In listening, we validate and justify effort and experiences. It is a simple courtesy that breeds mutual respect and fosters communication through greater common understanding.

Although considered a “softer skill,” there is a rising appreciation that the development of a clear understanding of environment and the personalities, norms and values that populate it, is paramount for successful leaders, as are the identification of personal strengths and the tailoring of conduct to achieve a desired outcome.

Says Steven Covey in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*: “If you want to interact effectively with me, to influence me, you first need to understand me.” Leaders have to build the skills of emphatic listening on a base of character that inspires openness and trust, he says. Self-respect is a solid foundation for mature discourse. As

important is creating an environment where individuals can safely express their thoughts.

The second egotistical hurdle is to realise that larger outcomes have little to do with you and everything to do with the people who surround you.

Companies are made up of more than a few brilliant leaders; a bevy of individuals with different potentials and approaches back them up. Leaders need to be able to tap into group intelligence and maximise group co-operation through enhanced motivation. They also need to empower

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individuals to actively participate in a collective engagement to the advancement of the organisation. To do this, they need to command the respect of these individuals through effective communication that preserves the dignity and trust of those involved.

The fast change to a democracy and international economic inclusion has forced South African leaders in all realms to move fast to accommodate shifting perspectives. Value and belief systems have been remade and adherence to accepted standards of conduct and authenticity in interpersonal interactions has become critical.

At the highest levels, leaders work hard to be aware of the world around them. Cultural shifts in communication, interaction norms and changing business climates, among others, will be incorporated into their actions. It is also their responsibility to make sure that the people they lead are aware of change.

Note New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani in *Leadership*: “Leadership works both ways: it is a privilege, but it carries responsibilities – from imposing a structure suitable to an organisation’s purpose, to forming a team of people who bring out the best in each other, to taking the right, unexpected risks.”

The pinnacle of leadership commences with the influencing of attitude. While leadership is a top-down exercise, basic values can be inculcated from the lowest levels and exercised at the highest, to create a safe

leadership

environment for the development of desirable competencies and behaviours that create a sustainable organisation.

Identifying those values, competencies and behaviours, enabling and embodying them, then sets the groundwork for the creation of a company culture where talents are nurtured and potential can be realised.

Exploring the latent strengths of individuals and creating an enabling environment for actualisation of those talents requires an investment in time and consideration, however – one that relies on some of the most basic leadership competencies, such as listening, to bear fruit.

The answer to leadership development lies in creating parallel personal and business skills development paths

In *Good to Great Companies*, Jim Collins notes that to ensure the sustainable development of a company, two aspects should be present in all great leaders. The first is humility — realising you are just human and trying your best; and the second is a stoic will, an acceptance that you are responsible for the consequences of your actions. In South Africa, this became a humbling, but necessary requirement in all spheres and, where it is practised, it has become a cornerstone of sustainable growth.

To distinguish a challenge from a risk, the third competency leaders must develop is a clear idea of the strengths and weaknesses of their followers and the predictability of the variables that impact an outcome. To understand what is possible and what motivates people, leaders need to interact.

Inasmuch as individual and team motivations will change for various reasons at different stages, leaders too can modify their method of interaction to get what they want from the situation. A consistent, but adaptable leadership style needs to be applied. Where standards and rules are in place, the rules cannot be broken. Standards can be changed, though. While etiquette is a guiding principle, taming egocentric response, leaders need to go further, actively developing an outward perspective – depersonalising their responses, but personalising and contextualising the input they receive. What people hear

and act on depends on their position, power and ego. Subtleties are grounded in the make-up of the individual.

A sifting process is convenient to assist leaders to recognise potential. Timing is very important in this equation. A brash young manager may not know the difference between strategic intent as a direction and as a viability. While too great a focus on people will almost certainly muddy the attainment of business goals, too limited a focus on the personalities and skills present could limit the achievement of positive outcomes.

Models for engagement include parenting. This does not imply that a leader should take on a parenting role, but that the method of child/parent communication can be applied. In this instance, the “parent” has a clear understanding of the basic values that need to be established or introduced and, depending on the “child’s” level of emotional and skills development, what responsibilities can safely be assigned.

Good leaders can identify between offering individuals a growth challenge and taking a risk. “Delayed success” is the new buzzword for failure to achieve to set standards. This “failure” is largely the result of the failure of the teaching/learning process itself. While many leaders take failure of employees personally, watering down responsibilities cannot solve the problem. Human resources can also provide little more than tools to measure the functional abilities of employees. The answer to leadership development lies in creating parallel personal and business skills development paths.

In *First Among Equals*, Patrick McKenna and David Maister note that managers must be willing to get most of their fulfilment from the success of others. To succeed in managing professionals, they say, “you need a special set of skills: the ability to influence other people’s emotions, feelings, attitudes and their determination”.

A leader’s knowledge of individuals’ strengths and weaknesses allows the facilitation of communication or problem-solving in group situations. The strongest people-orientated businesses, like Anderson Consulting and SA Breweries, create cultures on which their business strategy can rest.

The fourth leadership skill is becoming the custodian of culture. In open executive forums, the behaviour of

participants reflects their company norms and mores. Opinionated interjection and jumping to conclusions is common, with male participants reluctant to let less aggressive female counterparts contribute until they have had their say. Values and skills (competencies) combine to create behaviours. In this case, a lack of maturity prompts egocentric response. It is highly likely that a similar display of “skills” within a company setting will influence behaviour of staff at all levels.

The list and definition of the foundations of solid organisational culture is long and, at a glance, simple. The depth of understanding necessary in the active creation of a set of morals, ethics and principles (or whatever label one may want to apply) is, however, fraught with twisting innuendos. Leadership by example, a sense of honour, an understanding of the impact of actions and the value of process are essential conscious abilities of successful leaders of tomorrow.

The ability to look through a “past/present/future” filter and understand the input, the level of comprehension and the consequences of the attributes or attitude displayed by individuals is an enormous and frequently underestimated challenge faced by leaders.

Company culture is built by establishing shared core values, evaluating and developing necessary competencies and moulding these into behaviours that support and sustain an organisation. Leading by example requires leaders to first take ownership of this value system, however. Only then can they develop skills and competencies that will influence others’ behaviour. Openness, trust and mutual respect in all interactions are core values that have to be present to allow skills such as listening, debate and negotiation to be exercised fully.

The outlook of leaders must change as their functional skills, level of responsibility and level of influence increase within the company. This requires real investment in more difficult areas, such as relationship skills and personal development. A starting point is the identification and support of appropriate behaviours and attitudes within an organisation to instil a sense of individual ownership, responsibility and accountability. This enables individuals to make powerful personal choices regarding action, behaviour and relationships in business.

Many organisations today still err in their over-dependence on management abilities. Based on logical and rational processes and the development of functional skills, it is a seductive and easy short-term success. Awareness of the need for both technical/functional (rational) and interpersonal attitudes and abilities (extra-rational) skills is gaining influence in the local corporate arena. Obtaining a consistent balance between the two through the introduction of parallel personal and business skills development paths is required.

Leaders’ outlook must change as their functional skills, level of responsibility and influence increase in the company

South Africa, home to the Cradle of Humankind, is also the crib of leadership for the continent. It accounts for approximately 75% of the GDP for the southern African region and for 45% of the GDP for the entire African continent. Through the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) it promotes economic, political, and cultural regeneration of Africa and plays a large role in conflict resolution. Its emerging market status also makes it a global destination for foreign direct investment.

To grow business in South Africa and on the continent, leaders in this country need to recognise that they do not function in a vacuum. Just as good leaders know when to move on to new experiences to further their own development, so they know that it is cause for celebration when any person exceeds their previous achievements through developing skills that can be passed on to others. You can’t give it away if you don’t have it. On the outer edge of world conflict are clashes based on perceived (or real) differences in fundamental value systems. Little effort needs to be expended to hear disruptive voices – they come to you. The challenge to real leaders is to listen to the fundamental issues, to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying attitudes and behaviour, and only then to act where necessary. It takes special people to lead special people.

As South Africans, we are at this point, really leading the fray and have a lot to be proud of in the field of true leadership development. ■