

LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVES

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If ever there was a time the world needed good leaders, it is now. If ever there was a time the developing world needed good leaders, it is now. And if ever there was a time south africa needed good leaders, it is now. But do we have enough good leaders to go round – to run our countries, our companies, our governments, our civil society organisations?

The answer to that is “yes’, if all we’re looking for are people capable enough to take up leadership positions. But if we’re looking for leaders who embody old-fashioned values of leadership, viz.

- Integrity
- Honesty
- Transparency, and
- Humility

Then.....your guess is as good as mine.

So, what are the leadership imperatives for the world we live in today?

FIRST, LET ME TAKE YOU BACK TO THE WORLD OF YESTERYEAR.

In years gone by, circa 1970, a leadership position meant that you were lord of the Manor, a law unto yourself; you sat in an ivory tower and people tiptoed quietly around you. You were basically accountable to no-one but yourself. You spoke and didn’t listen much because, after-all, your word was final. You led from the front, and expected everyone to follow you. If any of the followers stepped out of line, or tried to “overtake” you, you could simply fire them. I’m generalising, of course, because there were, even during those times, leaders who were way ahead of their time – leaders who had EQ. The point I’m making is this : traditional leadership practices are failing, and organisations, businesses and even

countries, are the ones paying the price. AND YET, SADLY, REMNANTS OF THOSE PRACTICES STILL REMAIN, DESPITE THE PROBLEMS THEY CREATE.

The reasons for the failures in leadership that have become so common, are clear

- We have Forgotten our purpose
- We've Become power hungry
- We've allowed a slip in our ethics
- We've become Arrogant and greedy
- We Seek replicas of ourselves to promote or delegate to

Forty years later, the world we live in is a very different place. It demands a very different leadership, and so today's leaders have to keep up with the FAST pace of change. They have to be of good character. Today's leaders are expected to set the right tone at the top. A leader is now expected to do things RIGHT – not just to be DISCREET. That word, at any rate, flew out the window with the advent of social media. Today, leaders are expected to be accountable to a wide range of stakeholders :

And so TRANSPARENCY has become a leadership imperative. When I joined Boards about 25 years ago, if things had gone wrong, the concern would have been “ if this gets out!”. A modern Board today says, “ we need to manage communications on the issue.” That we need to tell people something wrong has happened, is now a GIVEN; the only question is HOW to do it, so as to manage the fall-out and minimise damage to the company or organisation, or the country. The reason this is happening is not because there are different laws, or King/JSE rules say it needs to be done this way. It happens because today's leaders understand the currency that is REPUTATION so much better now. No-one wants to be associated with a cover-up, but better still, everyone understands how a cover-up, once outed, will erode people's confidence in the leadership of a company, state or organisation. AND OUTED IT WILL BE. We are in the middle of a digital revolution, and only a DUMB leader wonders how information got out.

So what does that say about how we should lead in this VUCA world? Well, it simply means, we can no longer lead from the front, nor from the back. We need to walk alongside people we are leading, right in the centre!!. That way, we are never too far from those we lead. You have your eyes constantly on each and every member, encouraging, cajoling, sometimes even corralling them onto the right path. This means that there will be some who walk ahead of the leader. A good leader, who understands the power of harnessing a team's strengths, will allow and encourage that to happen. He or she will not be threatened; they will shout out encouragement to the front team, showing confidence in their ability to navigate, sometimes warning them of pitfalls to look out for, and occasionally even asking, " what do you see yonder?" He might occasionally have to run to catch up with the team ahead, and have them walk him through their new discoveries.

Today's leader finds time to chat to the teams walking in the middle/center, side by side with him. He catches up on what their challenges have been, and what their dreams are. He encourages them to walk faster and catch up with the front-team, and brings them up to speed with developments in the front line. He inspires them to want to walk faster and be part of the discovery team in the front.

A good leader constantly glances back at those who have fallen behind. He stops to encourage them to soldier on, no matter how hard. He points to those who were in the middle team, who have now joined the front team. And so he picks up his pace again, taking forward into the middle team some who were energised by his presence, his guidance, and a need to step a little bit forward.

If strong, collaborative, responsible leadership was needed anywhere in the world, it would be in the Developing World. Because WE are the future, and we CANNOT afford to get it wrong. There is simply no time to waste, and we have been overtaken by events. The world is moving EAST and SOUTH, faster than we can say MOVE. South Africa needs leaders, in government, business, SOEs, civil society and all other spheres, who can speak truth to power, who do not close

rank on issues but concentrate on the principles. Leaders such as Reuel Khoza, Lot Ndlovu, and many others.

This brings me back home, to the role that Black Leadership has played in carving out and influencing the outcomes of transformation. I would be in denial if I pretended that business has not had to be nudged, cajoled and sometimes kicked to embrace transformation in its WIDEST construct ; in other words, introducing more gender, colour and skills diversity and inclusivity into the work place; confronting behaviours that are a barrier to Black excellence; sustainable ways of doing business, driven by a purpose higher than the mere pursuit of profits etc. Organisations such as the Black Management Forum have been at the forefront of this push, and Lot Ndlovu, whom we honour tonight, was amongst those leading the charge. This has led to women and Africans being prioritised for promotion, and fully-able but physically challenged people having space carved out for them. Through the efforts of these organisations and leaders, aided by legislation, putting women and people of colour in key, strategic positions has become common place. THAT we must celebrate and be proud of. But we have a long way to go still, and collaboration and building alliances between leaders of govt, business, civil and professional organisations, will be of paramount importance.

However, sometimes the aggressiveness and zeal with which the transformation agenda was followed has led to unintended consequences, which have served to feed stereotypes already held about the very people that transformation was meant to benefit. Businesses, in their haste to meet EE quotas and please government and organisations that drive transformation, have looked for quick wins, sometimes even sacrificing meritocracy. This has led to people being promoted into positions they were not ready to handle, thereby leading to their dismal failure, and the perpetuation of the stereotype that Africans and/or women, are incapable of leading. But by far the worst unintended consequence has been how highly capable individuals, promoted purely on merit, have been robbed of the ability to enjoy their victory, as they were seen as token appointments. That, for me, has been the saddest consequence of the combative

nature of the narrative on transformation. I KNOW for a fact that this is not what the pioneers of transformation had in mind.

This is not only detrimental to the people pushed into those positions, but also to the organisations they have to take leadership positions in. South African leaders have to come to a common understanding of what leadership qualities we are seeking, in order to build stronger organisations for the benefit of our country. David Ogilvy, founder of Ogilvy and Mather, once said, “ If we continue hiring people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants.” Read country for company, and the sentiment is still true. Consistently hiring people who are smarter than us, may well be the greatest legacy we leave this country.

Leaders have the responsibility to consistently set the bar higher, if we want to see our country become a giant. I read somewhere a quote made by the man that we honour today – Lot Ndlovu. He said, and I quote” Those who have their hands on the levers of power should tremble each time they make decisions, for what they do now will eventually affect the community out there.”

The good news is that all is not lost. As long as we have leaders who look back, introspect, and learn from their mistakes, this country will be OK. I’m reminded of the Overview Effect, a term coined by philosophers after they interviewed astronauts on their return from space.