

Leadership and the Corporate Ladder: My take

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Growing up in the township is very challenging and quite daunting. One is faced with so many challenges on a daily basis. It can either make you or break you – and often, the latter happens. It’s a daily life-and-death struggle, literally. Poverty, strife, hunger, violence, etc. are experiences that play out every day in many townships, fortunately not in all of them. So many never get to see the other side: Joy, breakthrough, opportunity, and growth. They never get the opportunity to get a different viewpoint. I know I’m painting a very gloomy picture, but it is the reality of life in the township and there’s nothing romantic about it. I could go into more detail about what I mean, but it is not for the topic I’m writing about. What is the other side? It is the world outside of the township. It is the multitude of opportunities and possibilities that exist beyond one’s immediate surroundings in the township. Don’t get me wrong, there is life, plenty of life in the township. There are plenty of opportunities as well, however, these are covered in difficulty, trial, and fear. It is just many a time very difficult to see them or even pursue them because of the prevailing dogma that to succeed or “make it,” one must leave the township. The other sad reality is that so many young lives are cut short because there is no vision, support, or even thought about what lies beyond. Bread and butter issues take priority and there is never much time to dream. Township life is a real depiction of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. There are exceptions though, quite a number of them.

I was born and raised in Alexandra Township (Alex), north of Johannesburg. It is nestled between the shiny and opulent northern suburbs of Sandton *et al.* It is surrounded by Wynberg on the west, Marlboro and Kelvin on the north, Kew, and Lombardy West, and Lombardy East on the south. Formed in 1912, it is one of the oldest townships in South Africa and has produced several prominent individuals such as Kgalema Motlanthe, Dr Irvin Khoza, and one of my all-time favourite soccer players, the late great Isaac “Shakes” Kungoane. It also produced me, a future prominent individual, ahem.

Growing up in the 80s and 90s wasn't easy, but my parents worked hard despite systemic challenges to provide for me and my three brothers. They ensured that we had a roof over our heads, food to eat, and that we went to school. They made our house a home. They worked so hard that they even were able to at least send me and my younger brothers to the then Model C schools to try and improve our social and economic prospects with the dawn of democracy on the horizon. A mother and father, despite clear obstacles, still ensuring that their children grow up with good manners, respect, self-belief, ambition, and drive. This for me is leadership, some will call it parenting. I have learnt courage from my mother. She always finds a way even in extremely difficult times. Raising four boys is extremely challenging, but she did it. Her boys are all still alive today because she was there and led by example. She is very special to me. My mother and father will always be heroes to me. I am forever grateful for all that they have done for me and my brothers. I must also emphasise that my primary schooling in Alex was great and helped to shape the man I have now become. I am forever grateful to the teachers and principals at Emfundisweni Primary and Pholoshoh Higher Primary Schools respectively. Their dedication, diligence, empathy, love, and care affected me positively and made me believe in myself and had a profound impact on me to this day. I can recall our principal at Pholoshoh, Mr Mashiloane, emphasising cleanliness, pride, hard work, and respect. He and his staff took pride in us and the school and ensured that they developed future leaders who would go on and do great things. That is leadership! My time at St Mary's and Redhill Saturday school also immensely strengthened my resolve and belief that I can achieve anything if I believe and diligently apply myself. There are so many of us out there who were blessed to have attended these Saturday schools as they made a positive impact in our lives and improved our academic and social skills across racial and cultural backgrounds. Again, this for me is leadership – developing young people to their full potential and positioning them for the future. My high school experience was one that instilled pride, dedication, courage, and hard work in me.

My time at King Edward VII School (KES) (Standard 6 till mid Standard 9) and Sunward Park High School (mid Standard 9 and Matric) was special and I cherish it deeply. My time at KES really opened my eyes to what was possible. At the time I was young and did not have a grasp of what it meant to be in that environment and interact with boys from different races, cultures, and backgrounds. You can imagine a 13-year-old from Alex going to Standard 8 at a model C school in Houghton in 1992 and being only one of two black boys in a class of 30. It was really daunting but with hindsight, we had so many great

experiences and learnt so many lessons, which I still apply to this very day. One of my fondest memories at KES happened in 1993 when former President Mandela visited the school. My then guidance teacher offered me a one-on-one meeting with Tata and I thought she was joking, but on the day of his visit I remember being called out of my Afrikaans class to meet Tata. I can vividly remember walking down the long corridor towards the quad and there he was with my guidance teacher and a few others waiting for me. It was surreal and it still is to this day. That is leadership for me. My guidance teacher showed great leadership in living up to her promise and creating a lasting experience for me. Tata Mandela showed great leadership in being patient, humble, and interested in meeting with me after having to meet the entire school and teachers. By making time for me, the gesture indicated to me that he cared and was interested. I will forever cherish that experience.

Throughout my childhood I was fascinated by business, companies, investments, and suits, yes suits. It all started at home when, everyday I would observe my father getting ready for work. He was smartly dressed in his suit and looked the part. He worked for a well-known Japanese motor company for many years and was highly regarded at work. On top of that he spoke and wrote extremely well. You would have thought he was the CEO. I can recall marvelling at his signature's complexity and exquisiteness. I can recall his stories about business calls he would make to Japan and the awards he would annually win at work. In my eyes he was a great business/corporate leader even though he was a middle manager with limited prospects of climbing higher in the corporate ladder due to the apartheid laws and limitations placed on black people. My dad's working career was very interesting despite the clear limitations due to the laws of the country at that time. He was extremely disciplined, hardworking, and intelligent. He assisted so many and created opportunities for them within the companies he worked for. He did not only look out for himself but also for others. In the 24 years spent working at Motor Corporation, he ended up being the sales warranty manager. He then joined a retail giant in the FMCG space where he worked for 10 years, eventually becoming a store manager. In my view, if times were different, he would have ascended to the top of the corporate ladder. My dad was a leader in my eyes. He cared about people and their wellbeing. He led by example. He solved problems and even created a home environment that was great to grow up in. My interest in the corporate world was sparked.

Growing up, I was always a good academic student, and this afforded me the opportunity to attend Saturday schools (as stated earlier) in the previously

white schools in the suburbs. This allowed me to get a glimpse of the world beyond my township and to interact with people from different backgrounds. It also enabled me to further improve academically and somehow prepare me for competing at a different level, especially in high school where I was classmates with bright young people from different cultural, socio-economic, and racial backgrounds. There was a guy at school named Tony Wu. I have never met anyone as clever as he was. I remember him getting 100 percent for Maths and something like 99 percent for Art. Who gets 99% for Art? How is that even possible? Additionally, my aunt worked as a home assistant for the CEO of the same company that my dad worked for. This enabled me during school holidays to visit and interact with them. This further increased my interest in the corporate world and business in general. I believed that this business interest coupled with my academic rigour plus perceived leadership abilities would stand me in good stead when the time came. Further evidence was when I dropped out of my Computer Systems engineering studies at Wits Technikon due to financial difficulties. Truth be told, I did not enjoy most of the course at all and felt relieved when in a roundabout way I could stop it albeit not by default. In my heart I knew I wanted to study business and progress up the corporate ladder.

I must point out that it never naturally dawned on me what the corporate ladder really was and what it entailed. I had no clue about what it takes to be a good business leader and corporate head honcho. However, having spent time at the local library in Alex, I became interested in business studies, especially the Masters in Business Administration degree (MBA). As I got older, that feeling got stronger and stronger and I became obsessive about studying and completing an MBA. In my view, it was the ticket to business success and climbing the corporate ladder. I now have an MBA but still have a lot to learn, still have a lot of growing to do and barriers to break. The journey is only beginning and I'm very excited about the future and what it potentially holds. By the way, an MBA is a good "toolbox" To have but does not automatically translate to the corner office or even competence. You still need to be good at what you do to grow and succeed in the corporate world. I'm still glad I have it though.

My definition of Corporate Leadership

It has been said over time that leaders are born and not made, while others believe the inverse to be true. Some have said that leaders serve, must be authentic, must care about people and must leave a trail of leaders wherever they are. All these are true and noble traits of leadership to live by and aspire to.

In the corporate world, it is critical that there is a strong leadership pipeline to ensure continued growth and sustainability of the business. It is also important that succession planning is undertaken to safeguard the organisation against a leadership vacuum in case of departures, retirements, or passing of existing leaders. Over the years it has been shown through real corporate examples that sound and true leadership is necessary for business to grow, flourish, and even survive. We've seen supposedly good businesses unravel due to poor leadership at board and operational level. The devastation to shareholders, employees, and society has been colossal. My sincere belief has always been and continues to be that authentic leadership is critical to business success and sustainability, which is why my ambition has always been to be one of the cohort or pool of potential leaders to be in line to lead when called upon in business. I continue to learn and grow daily to ensure that when the time comes, I'll be ready.

Taking lessons from my childhood, family, schooling, corporate life so far, and general experience, I will try to further define corporate leadership in my own words and analysis. I will use the simple and yet powerful analogy, in my view of an individual in possession of a ladder. He will be using it to climb on top of a house to get a great view of the horizon as the sun rises and sets. One usually begins as a general employee, managing oneself, and then climbs the ladder through the management levels to then ultimately get to the executive suite and potentially CEO, and at times even to being part of a board of directors of a company, if that is their career path and journey. Therefore, the analogy I want to make is a perfect illustration of climbing in the leadership context, at a simplistic and basic level.

The first illustration is of a person with a ladder climbing up the roof and then pulling the ladder with them onto the roof and thus depriving others of the opportunity to climb as well and join them to see the view – **the all-about-me syndrome**. The second illustration is a person using the ladder to climb up the roof and then pushing the ladder down, forgetting that at some point they will need to climb down from the roof. They remain trapped on the roof and are at the mercy of those at the bottom who can then decide whether to put up the ladder so that they can climb down safely – **the I-did-it-myself loner**. The third illustration is of a person who uses the ladder for not only themselves but brings others along with them to climb to the top of the roof so that they can all enjoy the great view and in the end safely descend down as well – **the my-brother's-keeper cool cat**.

In the next sections, I will explain the individual illustrations, using my personal experience of each and made-up scenarios and how these have shaped

me as a person and aspirant leader, trying to climb the corporate ladder. Keep in mind that this analogy can be used in any leadership setting and not only in the corporate world.

The All-about-Me Syndrome

Getting to the top of any endeavour or discipline, whether in business, sport, creative arts, or the like is not easy. It takes a huge amount of dedication, fortitude, self-belief, and support. There is also an element of luck or what I call *stepping out*: It is the act of putting oneself in a position to attract or take advantage of opportunities without them being visibly available. It is the adage of “the more you try the luckier you get.” However, there is this prevailing belief of “self-made” people. These are the people that supposedly reached the top on their own, using their own strength and abilities, with no assistance or help. In my opinion it is not possible to make it on your own without some sort of support or assistance. Even the greats have had support: Warren Buffet had Benjamin Graham, Indra Nooyi (former PEPSICO CEO) was inspired by her older sister, Patrice Motsepe had his dad, and Mike Teke had his beloved grandmother. The point I’m trying to make is that nothing happens in a vacuum. The road to success or greatness is paved with a great support system and people who believe in your dreams and help you make them a reality in one or the other shape or form.

Therefore, I don’t buy into the all-about-me syndrome. Let me elaborate. Above I have referred to this individual who wants to get on the rooftop of the house to take in the great view of the horizon. It looks spectacular from the top of the house. He owns a ladder and uses it to climb onto the roof to enjoy the view. He is fortunate as he is the only one in his neighbourhood who has such a view and a ladder to take it in. When he climbs onto the roof, he takes the ladder with him onto the roof and thus deprives others from joining him. Yes, it is his ladder and he has every right to do as he pleases with it. However, my sentiment is that being in a position of privilege affords one the opportunity to include others and bring them with to also access and enjoy the benefits. In this case, sharing the ladder with others and being open to assisting them to climb, takes nothing away from you and instead creates a lasting and impactful pipeline of leaders who will share the same belief system and ethos of serving and building up others to become leaders as well.

I have had the experience of self-centred and inept leaders whose sole focus was on themselves and not their teams. Everything was about them and how they toiled to get to where they are and therefore expect others to do

it for themselves as well. Essentially, this was about getting your own ladder and view. It is the belief that my struggles give me the right to not share or not be open to assisting others, as that would be a negative enabler. It is like ascribing overcoming difficulties to a strong character. It may be so but not in all cases. There are times where it is unnecessary to put others through struggle in the hope that they will appreciate their success more. It makes no sense to me that if I have the means to make someone's life easier, I don't because I believe they will take it for granted because they did not suffer in attaining it. I truly believe that my suffering and overcoming strife are the building blocks to creating a stronger and firmer foundation for those who are coming after me. Therefore, I believe leaders primarily exist to build other leaders and leave a positive legacy of servanthood and service, whether in corporate, government, or social enterprises. The inability or unwillingness to impart knowledge, share, assist, mentor, coach, sponsor, and engage is a massively missed opportunity for leaders and deprives organisations of the opportunity to create an enabling culture that supports leadership development which in turn has a positive long-term effect on succession and sustainability.

The I-Did-it-Myself Loner

This individual is like the all-about-me guy. The key difference between them is that the loner climbs onto the roof and has this great view alone but then throws the ladder back down to the ground, forgetting that at some point they will need to climb down the roof. They remain trapped on the roof and are at the mercy of those at the bottom who can then decide whether to put up the ladder for them to climb down safely. This is the individual who has forgotten where they come from and are so engrossed with being on top that they forget every sense of reality. They forget that more often than not people gravitate towards them because of their position or title and not necessarily their true being. Remove the position/title and no one cares. This scenario plays out so often in the corporate world and even in other spheres that the office you hold is respected and therefore you are automatically "respected" Too. The leader mistakes the respect afforded to their office to their personal importance. The loner leader is concerned about how they are perceived and who they associate with and not the substance of their character. They look down on those who are in their care. I've even heard of a leader who would remind his team about how much he is paying them and that without him they are nothing. It is as if he was paying them from his own pocket. I had an unfortunate experience of a very senior leader who would walk past the teams in his division without even a

glance at them and never greeting them on his way to his office. I also remember that when he was unceremoniously removed from his position, no one blinked or was sad about it. No one cared. No one respected him and no one felt sorry for him. He had thrown the ladder back down to them during all those times that he puffed out his chest and walked by without even acknowledging them, and they took the ladder and walked away with it.

A friend of mine once relayed a story about a leader who frowned upon juniors who would try to engage with her and ask her to mentor them and become their sponsor to advance their careers. She is from the school of thought where self-sufficiency and hard work are the primary drivers for corporate success and climbing the corporate ladder. She credits her personal character, steeliness and chutzpah to her career growth and success. Although it is true that these traits played a key role in her success and progression, I do not believe that these are the only qualities that led to her ascent. There must have been a leader or leaders who believed in her, made space for her, and pitched on her behalf in rooms where she was not present. She must have had great relationships with leaders of influence and sway to enable doors to be opened for her over and above her innate capabilities and skills.

In my experience, time and time again I have seen that having an influential leader as a sponsor is important to help advance your career and move you up the ladder. Without a sponsor, one is stuck with continuously trying to prove themselves and coming up short in the recognition stakes because they lack representation where it matters. Don't get me wrong, not everyone wants to be recognised or even become a leader in business. However, for those who want it, having meaningful support through great relationships and a sponsor is key to growing and advancing one's career. It still boils down to competence though. Without it, no one will avail themselves to mentor or even sponsor someone.

Therefore, I struggle with the so-called I-did-it-myself loner because they clearly have benefitted from having support, sponsorship, and mentorship from other leaders, but they did not pass it on. They were provided with platforms and opportunities to showcase themselves under the guidance of seasoned leaders who believed in them and put them on. So why not pay it forward? Why not develop other leaders? Why not grant others the same opportunities which were granted to them? Why do they want to be the only one who has a great view of the horizon? Is it not what leadership is about: Growing other leaders and creating a lasting pipeline that will strengthen the organisation and thus ensure its sustainability over the long term? There are so many examples of this being done from an organisational perspective. Think of General Electric under

Jack Welch. A continuous stream of leaders was created through a deliberate and structured leadership development process that ultimately produced such a great calibre of leaders such as Jeff Immelt who took over from Jack Welch at GE; Robert Nardelli who went on to run Home Depot; Jim McNerney, former Boeing chairman and CEO, and many more. There is a clear value in transformational and deliberate leadership and its effects are long lasting.

My-Brother's-Keeper Cool Cat

This illustration is of a person who uses the ladder not only for themselves but brings others along with them to climb to the top of the roof so they can all enjoy the great view and, in the end safely descend down as well. I truly believe that for organisations to continue to thrive and succeed, leadership plays a key and at times even an understated role. We know of the saying that people do not leave organisations but leave their managers. It is because leaders renege on their role of leadership and focus on managing. You don't manage people, you manage processes, systems, and events. You lead people. You take them on a journey with you, you make them see the vision and make them feel part of the process and at a granular level make them understand how their role and contribution is a critical part of the whole machinery and the success of the organisation. Building a culture of trust, transparency, authenticity, and approachability gains the leader huge amounts of goodwill, buy-in, and support. True leadership is a great motivator. Using the ladder analogy, in my view great and lasting leadership is premised on taking your team with you on the journey, making them feel valued, seen, and heard. This means making the ladder available for them to climb and also helping them to climb up and ensuring that all those that want to climb up are given the opportunity to, especially if they have demonstrated a willingness to learn, grow, and perform at a high level consistently.

Organisations are built and sustained through people. People need great leadership to thrive and become the best version of themselves. I'm sure you have seen the meme based on Richard Branson's words where the CFO says to the CEO, "What if we train them and they leave?" The CEO responds, "What if we don't train them and they stay?" This meme shows two schools of thought: One is focused on potential loss, where the organisation will potentially not get the return on investment from training and developing its people. This is very short-sighted and negates to consider the role that leadership, culture, etc. play in decisions that people make about working in organisations. It presupposes that people are two dimensional and have no intrinsic connection with the organisation. It is a transactional presupposition. The second school of thought is

one that in my view aligns to the my-brother's-keeper analogy of understanding that you bring others along with you as a leader and you provide them with the tools to be great, and in turn they make the organisation great too. Yes, you will lose some people along the way – that is natural and expected. However, in the long term the organisation will benefit greatly from developing and leading them authentically.

In my career so far, I have been very fortunate to have had great leaders who have supported me and believed in me. They have created the space for me to flourish, express myself, and develop to my true potential. I have learnt so much from them and continue to do so even today. Some have become great friends of mine and I cherish them. I have experienced the positive impact of a leader who is a my-brother's-keeper. They have enabled me to access platforms to showcase my skills and strengths, and to test myself with challenging assignments. They provided me with access to decision makers and influencers whom I know very well now. Even when I have fallen short or have failed, they continued to trust in me, drive me forward, and encourage and support me to be better.

As a leader, it is greatly fulfilling when you can see a positive change in people due to your support, motivation, and caring. It goes a long way in building confidence in others and creating an environment of trust, accountability, and delivery. As much as I have and continue to have great support from leaders I directly work with, as well as others through mentorship and coaching, I must also pay it forward and help other young leaders to reach their potential. This is how I help them climb the ladder to get a better view and fulfil their ambition and drive. There is enough space for all of us to thrive and be successful. Creating opportunities for others does not take away from your ability to access the right prospects for yourself. I believe the contrary. The more you are open to others and are helpful, the more you open yourself up for blessings and positive karma. I have seen this manifest in the corporate world, and it is a beautiful experience.

The corporate world is very complex and demanding. It is not for everyone. In my view, leadership is a deliberate concept. It is a conscious mindset that translates into tangible actions that positively impact people, whether they are your superiors or your colleagues. Leadership is even more critical, now more than ever as we meander through a fast-changing world with raised levels of uncertainty and complexity. VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) is at an all-time high, exacerbated by the global pandemic that has changed life as we knew it. Change is a constant. Therefore, I believe that real, authentic, and impactful leadership is critical for continued business success,

and building a strong leadership pipeline will minimise succession risk and improve long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, one's title does not automatically translate to good leadership. Being a good corporate leader and helping others to climb the corporate ladder starts with the understanding that one does not get to the top on their own. Leaders should be servants and as Simon Sinek says, "Leadership is not about taking charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge." One of the ways of doing that is by developing new leaders and paying it forward, as sharing your knowledge and skills go a long way in bringing others with you on the journey and ultimately benefit the business and society as a whole.



MFANASIBILI EMMANUEL MDHLULI is a natural relationship builder, he is equipped with the vision and purpose to drive organizational change and is able to adapt positively to any challenges that arise both personally and professionally. He is a self-starter who is goal-driven, dynamic and passionate in his dealings with people and business. He is an excellent communicator and networker with well-developed interpersonal skills. He is a team player and has the ability to form trusted relationships with clients, partners, subordinates, as well as superiors. His business ethos is based on shared value and long-term sustainability.