

The Importance of Purpose and Personal Vision
in Leadership:
A Conversation with the Next Generation of
South African Leaders – the Meaning and Essence
of Leadership

Msizi Khoza

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discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.*
- Frantz Fanon

A lot has been written about the characteristics of good leadership. Indeed, even a cursory internet search will reveal many books, blogs, and TED talks on the topic. However, in many instances these materials are frequently disconnected from our lived realities and consequently often prove useless as a practical guide for any measurable improvement.

The insatiable demand for leadership studies and self-help guides is a natural consequence of the frequent failure of leadership across the government, politics, business, and non-profit spheres. Though the estimates vary, there is a growing consensus that, especially among young people, progressively fewer people trust their leaders. In addition, research from the Conference Board finds that, globally, job satisfaction is at all-time lows and the tenure of chief executives is decreasing at an accelerated rate since 2008. Other survey research points to the undeniable fact that organisations mark their own leadership development efforts with a big F for FAILED.

It seems increasingly clear to me that there is a dearth of good leadership across our society. Crucially the situation does not seem to be improving. Despite their many shortcomings, some books and essays do provide useful guides on how to be a more effective leader. In my experience, these are often personal accounts and reflections drawn from many years of experience in corporate boardrooms and high-stakes meetings with customers, suppliers, regulators, and other stakeholders. Whilst I would never claim to have such a

vast experience myself, I have been privileged enough to work for and alongside many senior leaders across the corporate, public policy, academia, and public office environments.

This short essay is a personal reflection of what I have found to be these leaders' most defining characteristics and the value that they derived from understanding their own personal drivers to guide and steer them through momentous decisions in contentious and fraught environments.

Unearthing the Value of a Deep Sense of Personal Mission

Long before my birth and in a far-away world, just before the Great Depression, one Frantz Fanon was born in the small Caribbean island of Martinique. Despite the unremarkable surroundings of his birth town and country, Fanon would later emerge as one of the most influential thinkers and philosophers of the modern age. When he penned his seminal work, *The wretched of the earth* in 1961, much of Africa was in the final battles of its struggle for independence from erstwhile colonial masters, and through his writings, he made observations that would inspire a generation of freedom fighters and activists to agitate for change. Perhaps his most impactful insight was that, in his analysis, “[e]very generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.”

And with that one searing insight, from Monrovia to Maputo, Cairo to the Cape Verde Islands, and from Atteridgeville to Accra, many a young freedom fighter bellowed out Fanon's observations in rallies and mass meetings, as an affirmation that theirs was a just struggle. So why does one start here? It is actually fairly simple. Every person with full agency must, if they are to lead their lives to the fullest, have an idea of what their personal mission is. Of course, it is not always possible, nor desirable to undergo this process of self-discovery in an environment which, as Fanon guides, is self-contained and relatively obscure, but it is critical to understand your personal mission. It is the one thing that remains intact, when everything around you feels unfamiliar and foreign. It is the one constant in an ever-changing world.

A Superhuman Effort to be Human

Given the sweep of their lives, the scope of their accomplishments, and the adoration and celebrity-like status that leaders rightly enjoy, pertaining to the most effective leaders that I have worked with, many make a conscious and superhuman effort to be human. They shun largess and hordes of aides fretting

after them. They are practical and have an evolved sense of understanding of the complexity of their dilemmas and choices.

An essay marking the 500th anniversary of Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, echoes the words in that historical text, that sometimes it is necessary to do bad things to achieve good results. It is not surprising then that some of the most successful and effective leaders are pragmatists – willing to do that which is necessary to achieve important goals, forever testing their ideas and beliefs against the hard surface of circumstances and history. While this may sound contradictory, where these leaders set themselves apart is that they are unyielding on core principles, beliefs, and ideas.

During South Africa's negotiation for a democratic dispensation and new constitutional order, one of the leading negotiators of the key party would at the end of every session sprint out of the conference centre in the outskirts of Johannesburg, hastily climb into his car and drive to debrief the then leader of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela. As he recalls the experience in his memoirs, Mac Maharaj says that, after debriefing Mandela on the key points and highlights, Mandela would ask two questions: *How does this take us towards non-racial democratic elections? How does not doing this or reaching sufficient consensus move us away from that goal?* What is clear from this is that on the key issues and on his core belief – that the negotiation should not be derailed by side-shows and other *non sequiturs* – Mandela was unyielding.

For instance, I supported the Group CEO of a big local bank and headed her office during the most difficult and momentous period in the bank's history. We had been acquired by a large European bank a decade before, and after a strategic repositioning, they decided to exit their emerging market presence. The Group CEO selected a small sub-set of her executive team to lead "separation" negotiations with the erstwhile controlling shareholder. In many a meeting in which I was present, I was struck by how she, above all else, was practical and never allowed herself to veer from what she considered as the critical points on the negotiation. She steered the group through a complex series of engagements with regulators from 12 African countries, without whose support the deal would scupper. I was struck, not by her grasp of the technical content, which was excellent as one would expect, but by her softer skills – her ability to read a room and pitch her messages at the right level and with the appropriate tone.

In the ensuing months, she led the group through an intense and intrusive year-long strategic review to rethink the group's future after the sell-down. She was clear that the review would be grounded in a bullet-proof fact base of our

historical performance and competitive landscape, as with any other, and for it to gain real traction it would need to be owned by the entire organisation.

I have been involved in, designed, and been through several strategic reviews in my life – at a large East African telecoms player, an African gold mining giant, a large South African retailer, and even a Dubai recreational and amusement park operator – but none generated the level of enthusiasm and widespread support as this one. From bank tellers and branch que marshals to the colleagues running the models that determine the impairments, all of them knew the strategy alike. Following a rousing endorsement of that strategy, I watched intently as she iteratively processed the operating model implications and changes that she would have to make.

Following a long day of board sub-committee meetings, I walked in with a file of decisions that she had to make and remarks she had to edit. With the weight of certainly what felt like the world on her shoulders, she said: “Sometimes, leading is very lonely.” At that moment, it struck me just how difficult those few months following the approval of a new five-year group strategy by the board had been. An organisation of 40,000 plus people spread across 12 different countries was waiting in tense expectation for what would come next, not to mention the colleagues who were her direct reports. She consulted and confided with selected members of our board, a kitchen cabinet of trusted aides and when it was time for her to communicate her decisions, she did it with aplomb – in-person, directly and finely balanced (clear and concise and equally empathetic).

To say that not everyone was happy is a given. This hardly ever happens in massive corporate shakeups. However, the manner in which she was able to keep everyone onside and ultimately supportive of the new strategy and operating model, despite their individual circumstances, was a masterclass attempt in leading through difficult and fraught moments.

Years later, she told me that when it was unclear how much ructions and blow back this might cause, she always drew strength from her personal convictions and drivers – that she was merely a steward with a limited time in the exalted CEO chair and that she had a special responsibility to ensure that she left the firm in a better place than where she had found it – and that if the price of that conviction means losing close friends and colleagues, so be it.

At a different point in my career, I worked in the Presidency at perhaps the most contested but creative moment in the history of our country. To his credit, three years earlier, the President had established the National Planning

Commission and populated it with some of the best thinkers and experts in the country across every field from medicine to water and agriculture, from economics and finance to policing. These commissioners had spent three years diagnosing our challenges and designing a suite of recommendations and a 20-year blueprint for socio-economic development. The debates around economic policy in particular were intense and strident, with very senior public policy and political actors rejecting key policy platforms outright.

The pressure to kowtow was intense and unending, threatening at times to derail the adoption of the 2030 National Development Plan in its entirety. At a senior staffers meeting, the then Minister in the Presidency responsible for the NPC, said that no matter what happens and no matter what the political implications are, he stood by the recommendations of the secretariat. He told us that he believed deeply that the recommendations were underpinned by evidence and data and validated by the best available expert-level thinking in the country and globally. The importance of that assurance and “aerial cover” allowed us, the “foot soldiers” to confidently canvas our policy recommendations to the rest of the government bureaucracy and planning machinery.

I recall this story because sometimes leaders misunderstand the impact of even the smallest of gestures – that a five-minute affirmation delivered with the strongest of conviction to a team withering in public criticism can do a world of good and open a door that previously appeared closed. Years later, the former Minister would tell me that he didn’t agonise over that decision because years earlier, when he was an anti-apartheid activist, he had decided that he would dedicate his life and bring all his skills and energy to bear in the service of the people of South Africa and that this was always his driving force. Then, when it was time to make the difficult choices and we looked to him for guidance, he would not dwell in blame or wallow in dreamy idealism. The tough calls and decisions he would make, not only determined the direction of the nation, but revealed the character of the man and the strength of his personal convictions.

On reflection, I draw several important leadership lessons and qualities from these selected experiences:

- ◆ *Optimism*: Personally, I have never come across any person who is inspired and energised by pessimists and doomsayers. The leaders whom I have worked with who were the most effective were ones that were from my point of view, pragmatic optimists.
- ◆ *Courage*: To lead is never easy and without conflict. It is easy for leaders to try to be all things to all people and be averse of conflict. However, that

would be the very antithesis of leadership. It takes courage to do the right thing and to do it all the time. In the business setting, risk taking is the very foundation of any commercial enterprise. This is true for acquisitions and divestitures, investments, capital allocation, and innovation breakthroughs. Without courage, there is no business and certainly no leadership.

- ◆ *Focus and determination:* Where and how you spend your time is critical. This is true whether you're leading a JSE Top 40 company or your family. Deciding and communicating, clearly and often, where they spend most of their time, energy, and attention is critical for any leader. Without that clarity, there will undoubtedly be drift and with drift inaction and unmet expectations.
- ◆ *Decisiveness:* There is a subtle difference between being undecided and being indecisive. The most effective leaders I have worked with, have had one strong trait that stands *primus inter pares*, deciding with speed and conviction. Whilst good leaders seek a diversity of opinions and triangulate the truth from different sources, they do not allow the undecided to become indecision. They understand that chronic indecision is not only counterproductive and inefficient, but it is also deeply corrosive and detrimental to the morale.
- ◆ *Curiosity:* A constant yearning for new knowledge enables the discovery of new ideas and the deepening of one's understanding of their environment, and the marketplace and its changing dynamics. Curiosity is the mother of innovation.
- ◆ *Fairness and empathy:* As much as no one is inspired by pessimists, equally no one can innovate and feel value-additive in an environment permeated by fear. Treating everyone, no matter how low they may be in the organisational hierarchy, with the same level of respect, is essential to creating a "smell of the place" That is welcoming and embraces all people alike.
- ◆ *Thoughtfulness and balance:* This is an often underrated quality of good leaders. It is basically the process of seeking data and opinion, triangulation, and churning through different scenarios and potential outcomes so that any opinion offered, or decision rendered is not only more credible but also likely to be correct. Where great leaders separate themselves from the good leaders is that whilst they value consideration, they do not do this at the expense of the energy and confidence that flows from "deciding with speed and conviction," as I have intimated above.
- ◆ *Authenticity:* Great leaders are honest. They do not fake anything. They openly admit it when they do not know something. They tell the truth. They are comfortable in their own skins and so they never pretend to be

someone or something that they are not, and as a by-product, they gain respect and trust.

- ◆ *A relentless pursuit of excellence and reliable delivery:* Great leaders insist on the pursuit of excellence and perfection – but not at all costs! The most prolific leaders I have come to work with ingrain a strict refusal to accept mediocrity or excuses for why something was not done or why it is not up to the standard and quality expected. This often means telling teams to stay up all night, or for them to work around the clock to find alternatives and workarounds for missing inputs and doing revisions.
- ◆ *Uncompromising integrity:* In a world in which crass materialism rules the roost, leaders must insist on absolute and uncompromising integrity. Nothing is more important to the success of any organisation than the integrity of its people and products.

The most important ingredient, the *sine qua non*, of all these qualities is a deep and abiding sense of one's personal mission.



MSIZI KHOZA is currently a Director at Absa's Investment Banking division where he supports clients across the continent to tap into local and international capital markets in order to meet their financing needs.

Previously, Msizi was Chief of Staff to the Absa Group CEO. He provided daily strategic support to the CEO, supporting her in driving strategy execution, managing Group priorities and deepening relationships with key external stakeholders.

Msizi also worked at Ethos Private Equity, where he supported portfolio company executives in developing & refining strategic objectives as well as identify operational, commercial and financial levers to unlock growth.

Prior to that, Khoza worked as a consultant for global management consultancy, A.T. Kearney, where he advised C-Level executives of some of Africa's leading companies and governments. He was also seconded to the secretariat of the National Planning Commission, where he drove the recommendations for South Africa's economic infrastructure as part of the NDP.

Msizi began his career as a control engineer at Hatch & Associates where he designed control and instrumentation software for clients in the mining and mineral processing sectors.

Msizi's MEng thesis, entitled "Economic modelling using computational intelligence techniques", produced three peer-reviewed journal papers and was presented at international conferences of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE).

Msizi holds an MEng (Electrical) from the University of Johannesburg (2011-2012), a postgraduate Diploma (Leadership) from the Thabo Mbeki Leadership Institute (2011-2012) and BSc Eng (Computer Engineering) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2007 – 2010).

Msizi is a World Economic Forum Global Shaper and featured on the 2012 edition of the Mail & Guardian Top 200 Young South Africans

Outside his work commitments, Msizi is married with one child. In his spare time, beyond connecting with family and friends, Msizi is an avid reader and enjoys a good round of golf.