

Mandela and South African Youths: Grooming Leaders of Tomorrow

G.B. Essop

Summary

The aim of this article is to explore the leadership qualities of Nelson “Rolihlahla” Mandela in order to find out how his style of leadership can act as a source of inspiration for the South African youths. Mandela has received many accolades in South Africa, Africa and from the western world for applying “humanistic” principles in his leadership style, and for laying the foundation of democracy in post-independent South Africa. He is described as “an inspirer”, “a philanthropist”, “a man of great integrity”, and a “tactical genius” (*Inspire* 2014: 4). Works that emphasise the magnanimity of Mandela, however, also point at generosity as a one of his weaknesses. This article will acknowledge that Mandela – like any great leader – possessed his own weaknesses and yet that would not deter him from laying a firm foundation for future leadership among South African youths that, if taken seriously, can profoundly influence their ways of thinking and acting.

Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die leierskapskwaliteite van Nelson “Rolihlahla” Mandela te ondersoek ten einde vas te stel hoe sy leierskapstyl as ’n bron van inspirasie vir die jeug van Suid-Afrika kan dien. Mandela het baie eerbetone in Suid-Afrika, Afrika en die Westerse wêreld ontvang vir sy “humanistiese” beginsels wat hy in sy leierskapstyl toegepas het en omdat hy die grondbeginsels van demokrasie in Suid-Afrika ná apartheid gelê het. Hy word beskryf as “’n inspireerder”, “’n filantroop”, “’n man van integriteit” en ’n “taktiese genie” (*Inspire* 2014: 4). Literatuur wat klem lê op Mandela se groothartigheid, wys egter ook daarop dat sy vrygewigheid een van sy swakhede was. Hierdie artikel gee toe dat Mandela – soos enige groot leier – swakhede gehad het, maar dat dit hom nie daarvan weerhou het om ’n stewige grondslag vir toekomstige leierskap by die Suid-Afrikaanse jeug te vestig nie, en as dit ernstig opgeneem word, ’n sterk invloed op hulle manier van dink en doen hê.

Introduction

It is undeniable that world-wide, the survival of any political entity depends upon its youths that are commonly described as “agents of social and political change” (Nyamnjoh 2008: 41). Youths are described as such simply because they possess energy and enthusiasm to experiment with ideas and ways that can lead to the transforming of societies. Mandela had once been a youth who went through different forms of socialization that helped to construct and shape his identity as a leader. In other words, Mandela’s identity as a leader has a long history spanning from his country childhood experiences; his encounter with Johannesburg and its vagaries of modern life; his confrontation with apartheid with its brutalities informed by racial discrimination; his incarceration for twenty-seven years and his release in order to become the first democratically elected leader in post-apartheid South Africa. Much of the history about Mandela’s rise to power has been captured through Mandela’s autobiographical account *A long Walk to Freedom* (1994) and other celebratory works such as *Nelson Mandela: A biography* written by Peter Limb (2008). This article shall draw inspiration from such historical accounts that can provide an insight into Mandela’s leadership qualities, much of which was pragmatically demonstrated during his tenure as president in post-independent South Africa.

Mandela, Youths and Leadership Philosophies

The concept of leadership is problematic because its conceptualisation is subjective and contestable. According to Issa and David (2012) some researchers define leadership in terms of personality and physical traits, while others believe leadership is represented by a set of prescribed behaviours. Rost (1991) found that there were 221 definitions of leadership published in books and articles between 1900 and 1990. There was a strong indication that the number would change significantly since the observations made by Rost in 1991. For the purpose of this article, Poulin, Johnston & Ralph, (2007) provides different ways of conceptualizing leadership that this article will use to philosophise Mandela’s leadership qualities and its exemplary nature to South African youths. Poulin et al write that:

- **Leadership is about what you are:** This definitional theme focuses on leader traits and attributes and is one of the oldest ways of conceptualising leadership. This characteristic defines natural or born leaders.
- **Leadership is about how you act:** From this perspective leadership is defined as the exercise of influence or power. To identify leaders, we need to determine who is influencing whom. For instance, Hersey

(1984: 14) defines leadership as “any attempt to influence the behaviour of another individual or group”.

- **Leadership is about what you do:** This definitional thread focuses on the role that leaders play.
- **Leadership is about how you work with others:** This definitional theme emphasises collaboration. Leaders and followers establish mutual purposes and work together as partners to reach their goals.

(2007: 302)

The claim that, “leadership is about what you are” (Poulin et al 2007: 302) is critical in that it can be used to explore the emotional, intellectual and psychological leadership attributes of Mandela that South African youths can emulate and practically apply as leaders of tomorrow. Mandela’s active participation in African politics in the 1940’s produced vibrant youth organisation that energised black opposition to the brutality of apartheid and its heinous crimes against humanity. He increasingly moved to the centre of the struggle, and helped to re-configure South African politics at a time when the “Old Guard” that formed the back-bone of ANC tried as much as possible to avoid confrontation with forces of apartheid. Limb (2008) writes that senior members of ANC such as Xuma viewed youths as merely a wing of the more senior ANC; young activists such as Mandela wanted more autonomy and favoured ANC militant policies. Mandela’s love for military action was not because he was violent in nature, but it was because of his loath for the apartheid system that deserved to be condemned by progressive people and all peace-lovers in South Africa. The axiom that, “leadership is what you are” (Poulin et al (2007: 302) can be used to explain the “courage, empathy, compassion, caring, loving” (West 2006: 34) that Mandela demonstrated as a youth even he was quickly angered by a tradition that promoted militarism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism. What is redeeming is that South African youths can take a cue from Mandela’s character as a “tried and tested” leader who fought for the justice for all people in South Africa regardless of colour, race, class and creed.

The philosophical conception that, “Leadership is about how you act” (Poulin et al 2007: 302) grows out of a deeper understanding that leadership is not only about what you are as a person but it is also about what you can do to influence others towards positive change. Nelson Mandela is highly respected all over the world for taking pragmatic measures that led to the liberation of black people in South Africa. In addition, Mandela greatly influenced the political and ideological thinking of many people in post-independent South Africa when he did the “unthinkable” of extending an “olive branch” to his former enemies despite the fact it was the same people who incarcerated him for 27 years at Robben Island. His action demonstrated a rare kind of leadership quality which even shocked his tormentors who expected Mandela to take revenge. South Africa youths can learn that

leadership is about extending one's love towards others even if it meant reconciling with those that were once your enemies.

One bold step that Mandela took was to convince the white population as a whole that they belonged fully in "the new South Africa," and that a black-led government would not treat them the way previous white rulers had treated blacks. In South African political context that was so delicate that anything could happen, Mandela pointed out: "... you had to be very careful with the messages you put out. Strike a false note and you risked undermining the nation's stability; make the right gesture and national unity would be reinforced" (Mandela 1993: 14). Mandela's practical demonstration of empathy and magnanimity towards the underprivileged and those that were once his enemies, resonated very well with the philosophical conception of leadership that it is about, "... how you act" (Poulin et al (2007: 302). In Africa, there seem to be a "crisis of leadership" and "leadership crisis" (Issa & David 2012: 146) simply because those that are entrusted to lead people have no or little capacity to "act" on critical issues that will result in positive transformation of the lives of ordinary people.

Some leaders in Africa "act" but their action is narrow because it is directed towards matters that concern their lives; the lives of selected members of the elite class and the lives of their immediate families. It may not sound as an insult to say that in Zimbabwe, the leadership is failing people because it is allowing corruption, nepotism and bribery to destroy trust bestowed on them by the people of Zimbabwe. The rottenness has, unfortunately, created a clique of people that are very powerful economically, and who continuously milk the economy of the country using their political connections. In contrast, during his tenure of office, Mandela showed that he could go far in trying to make sure that South Africa remains peaceful, economic inequalities are addressed and that the concerns of youths are taken seriously.

South African youths can learn from the life of Nelson Mandela and his style of leadership that blends very well with the philosophy that leadership is not only about "how you act" but "what you do and how you work with others" (Poulin et al 2007: 302) to achieve both individual and collective goals. The somewhat trite expression that, "no man is an island" can be practically applied to show that Mandela was not a selfish leader who would decide alone on critical matters that determined the destiny of the nation. Working together with his deputy Thabo Mbeki and members of his government that included some former members of the apartheid regime, Mandela was able to demonstrate that leadership is also about bringing the best out of people who work together as a single entity to achieve common goals. In this regard, South Africa youths are being challenged to consider seriously the idea of collaboration so that tasks that appear insurmountable can be easier to tackle. Indeed, in the area of collaboration some South African youths such as D.J. Cleo, and other youths particularly involved in the arts industry, have shown a greater awareness for the need to combine their efforts in steering the

business of music, theatre and film. This is exactly what defines quality leadership as born out of collaboration and collective effort. So, Mandela as an “archetype” of effective leadership continues to inspire those South African youths that are poised to achieve greatness in their lives.

Mandela: The Great Inspirer to African Youths

Mandela stands out to be the most celebrated personality so far to have emerged from the African continent. He has been variously written about in literary works and history books, differently presented in [auto] biographies and the mainstream media [newspapers and television], fictionalised and actualised in film, immortalised through art work such as painting and sculpture. Mandela’s contradictory personality captured in both fictional and factual historical accounts is a great source of inspiration to African youths that have committed themselves to search for greatness. Mandela’s documentation probably is one of the best to be ever produced on a single leader in the African continent. His ideas and symbolic representations can be used to inspire youths and teach them that Africa is capable of producing quality leaders such as Nelson Mandela despite the existence of “myths” constructed by western world that view Africa as a “dark continent” where nothing positive can come out. Through sheer love, courage, determination and commitment, a human being can overcome difficulties in life even if s/he is exposed to some extreme forms of oppression exemplified by Mandela’s 27 years of incarceration and his prolonged struggle with the brutal system of apartheid. Leadership requires the existence of undying vision and commitment of people the likes of Mandela who were not discouraged or deterred by a racist, segregationist and brutalising system of apartheid that was totally against the independence of black people in South Africa

It is expected that youths who get inspired by Mandela’s work will demonstrate their sensitive and human agency by proving that, despite the existence of dictators in Africa, the continent is capable of producing democratic leaders that serve people without “fear or favour”. Reading books, watching movies and practically getting involved in advocacy work to promote Mandela’s vision will allow youths to grow and emulate his work as a leader who caused a “paradigm shift” in African leadership which challenges dictatorship and centralisation of power (Nyamnjoh 2008). According to Krauss and Suandi (2008) young people are capable of and responsible for making valued input to society especially when they are helped to make a contribution. Such “valued input”, in the context of South Africa, can only come about when youths are encouraged to emulate the values that were held dear by Mandela; values encapsulated in the philosophy of “*ubuntu*” known for its maxim that, “A person is a person through others” (Ramose 1998: 643). Thus, the exemplary nature of Mandela’s leadership rooted in the principles of

“*ubuntu*” can make youths take a cue for their moral and intellectual development. Mefalopulous and Kamlongela assert that:

Development is about change, and if development initiatives of any kind are to sustainable they should start with mechanisms that ensure broad participation by all those who have some interest in the intended change.

(2002: 253)

As agents of social of change, youths cause their learning experiences and capabilities to alter people’s views about social reality. Youths as “change agents” are often capable of broadening and deepening people’s perspectives of issues that can facilitate the acquisition of key skills and competencies. To substantiate the foregoing, Ausyouth (2001) asserts that there are various key components that are required for good-practice youth developments, and these are as follows:

- Utilising strengths-based positive youth development as the foundation for policy and programme development
- Allowing the participation of young people at all levels of planning and decision making
- Applying an experimental model of learning that builds youth capacities and skills, while maximising opportunities for fun, and recognising age and development
- Respecting community voice and identity
- Encouraging communities to value and engage young people
- Achieving quality outcomes
- Aiming at promotion that is ethical, honest and non-patronising
- Maximising formal and community recognition of learning outcomes
- Strengthening the interconnectedness of social networks.

Although the youthful life of Nelson Mandela was marred in controversies, through “youth good-practices” Mandela was capable to utilise his strength as a youth to develop his moral and intellectual abilities which he later used as the first leader of a free South Africa to bring about social, economic and political change. To many South African youths, Mandela can be remembered most for his policies that focused on improving the economic status of majority blacks that had often been neglected during the era of apartheid.

Mandela and Youths Economic Empowerment

Since Mandela got the reins of power in 1994, substantial gains were achieved in the field of economy that South African youths can emulate. Historically and during the period of apartheid, blacks were not allowed to venture into lucrative business areas such as mining, banking and finance, agriculture,

trade in precious minerals such as diamonds, shipping and owning big retailing outlets such as supermarkets. Such areas were strictly reserved for whites that were considered competent enough to own big businesses. Independence, therefore, for most South African youths brought rich prospects for black economic empowerment. Mandela (1993) believed that for South Africa to be placed on the path of rapid economic development, there were basically three areas that were problematic and needed urgent attention. The areas concerned were severe poverty among economically disadvantaged groups, slow growth and extreme economic inequalities between blacks and whites. Padayachee and Desai write that a few years after independence, many people in South Africa, including the youths, began to suffer from “the crisis of expectation” (2014: 23) in which rapid economic changes were expected to take effect that would benefit previously disadvantaged groups of people.

Mandela’s first move was to encourage blacks to venture into businesses that were previously reserved for whites without necessarily intimidating businesses that were owned by whites. His argument was that, since South Africa was a democratic country that promotes free business enterprise, anyone could start a business as long as it was legitimately supported by the terms that govern business investment. Committed youths grabbed the opportunity to venture into transport business as taxi operators, performing arts industry, building contractors, retail industry as shop owners, and the more privileged ones such as Julius Malema even ventured into finance and mining. However, since independence studies carried out by Padayachee and Desai (2014) reflect that many South African youths fail to compete effectively in the economic sphere because the “Bantu education” system installed by the apartheid regime in black townships place much emphasis on the arts subjects that are not very relevant for business enterprise. Also, high levels of poverty among blacks implies that most black families spent much of their time doing menial jobs in order to bring “food on their tables” instead of focusing on educating their children so that they become active participants in the mainstream economy.

To address disparities in the economic field, Mandela put in place robust measures ranging from slowing down population growth in the black community to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). These were initiated to address issues of poverty and inequality. By the beginning of the new century the South African government had increased the social grants, which form the safety net for the poor, to 22 Billion Rand (Berg; Burger; Louw. & Yu, D.

2006: 23). By early 1996 it had become clear that without new macroeconomic initiatives by the government, economic growth rates could not be attained that were both sustainable and high enough for effective poverty alleviation, income redistribution, employment creation and financing of essential social services (Padayachee & Desai 2012). The government then formulated the Growth, Employment and Redistribution

(GEAR) strategy. GEAR reiterated government's commitment to the existing economic policy framework, identified many of the structural weaknesses inhibiting economic growth and employment, and focused attention on market-based policies to address them. This helped to address employment creation, public works programmes, equity and discrimination, labour standards and job security, minimum wages and training for skilled labour (Padayachee & Desai 2012).

Although it remained an uphill task for many South Africa youths to venture into lucrative business, measures that were put in place by Nelson Mandela pointed towards a positive direction insofar as youth economic empowerment was concerned. However, the post-Mandela era has seen, among the youths, rising incidents of organised crime and violence, drug and alcoholic abuse, prostitution, xenophobic attacks, rape and other social ills. This is mainly a result of frustration with increasing gaps between the rich and the poor, high levels of unemployment among the youths, corruption and deteriorating economic conditions in post-apartheid South Africa. A general fear is that the kind of South Africa that Mandela envisioned and helped to construct, and the kind of values that he cherished are fast being pushed to the margins by challenges that South Africa is currently facing. Thus, the critical question for South African youths is: which way is forward?

South African Youths: Which Way is Forward?

The question: which way is forward? is critical at this point in the lives of the South African youths because the question seeks to re-configure the path of development; it is born out of the desperation of wanting to assess whether youths are making progress or not. In addition, the question acknowledges that the period of "honey-mooning" is over and that it is now high time that South African youths seek for a proper direction that will bring meaningful change in their lives. The "alternative" discourses encapsulated in cultural productions such as the film *Jerusalema: Gangster's Paradise* (2008) expose the cracks and fissures of racial acrimony, xenophobic attitudes, violence, crime, tales of betrayal and social decay found inside the world of the "rainbow" of the "rainbow nation" that initially brought hope to most South Africans including the youths. In this case, some desperate youths are implicated in criminal activities as well as being used as political pawns to vent their frustrations on foreign immigrants whom they accuse of stealing "their" jobs and robbing South Africa of their women. If South Africa youths re-configure their lives using Mandela as the pillar of their inspiration, they can come to grips with the reality of interculturalism that brings about "change in cultural diversity" (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992: 137) which benefitted bigger countries such as America.

Recommendations

South African youths have moral, physical and intellectual obligations to carry forward the vision that Mandela created. Thus, the practical application of a “development paradigm” that Mandela held so dearly calls forth for South African youths to:

- Re-configure their lives along the path of development by facing up to challenges brought about by social, economic and political changes.
- Become active agents of social transformation through self-reflexivity and participation.
- Interrogate and seek to correct those policies that discourage youths from participating meaningfully in the mainstream economy
- Cultivate sound leadership qualities by emulating the legacy that Mandela left behind for South Africans
- Mobilize societies to direct their efforts towards community development
- Shy away from anti-progressive activities such as drug taking, alcoholism, prostitution, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and being involved in crime.

(Bakary 1972: 23)

Conclusion

The destiny of South Africa lies in the hands of youths in South Africa. This article was built upon the premise that the future of South Africa can actually be killed today if youths fail to claim their “space” and begin to work towards changing life for the better. Nelson Mandela is a “God-given” individual that encapsulates human virtues of dignity, empathy, commitment, courage, integrity, quality leadership, philanthropism and magnanimity. The list is endless. South African youths can take a cue from the life experiences of Mandela in pre and post-independent South Africa. The article argued that it cannot be denied that Mandela faced many challenges some of which were caused by the activities of residual elements of apartheid, racial and economic disparities, the challenges of harmonising races that once saw each other as enemies, the complacent attitude of some members of his ruling party ANC and the challenges that were brought about by the dynamics of globalisation. Yet, through hard work and commitment to national goals, Mandela was able to go beyond the racial divide that characterised apartheid and ethnic divisions in black South African communities. Although Mandela is no longer with us, his legacy can live forever if youths take Mandela as an “icon” for positive development, a father for democracy, good governance and an architecture for love and national reconciliation.

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G.B. Essop

University of South Africa
essopgb@unisa.ac.za